

The Road to Myself

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Author's Note

This memoir is drawn from lived experience, remembered events, and the shifting landscape of memory. Some names,

identifying details, and minor elements have been altered for reasons of privacy, clarity, and narrative shape. What remains unchanged is the emotional truth of the journey.

About the Author

Peter Anthony writes from the meeting point of memory, place, and lived experience. His work explores longing, family, identity, and the hidden currents that shape a life over time. In *The Road to Myself*, he turns to memoir, tracing a journey through childhood, desire, loss, and the search for belonging.

Preface

There are lives that appear, from the outside, to move in a straight line. Mine never did.

What I remember most clearly is not certainty, but longing: the wish to be seen, to be wanted, to belong somewhere without condition. That search began early, long before I had the words for it, and it carried me through places, relationships, misjudgments, awakenings, and losses that I did not always understand at the time.

The Road to Myself is not the story of a single revelation. It is the story of a life lived in fragments that only later began to suggest a pattern. Memory has its gaps, and time changes the shape of what we think we know, but some truths remain. This book is my attempt to follow those truths back through the years and make sense of the person who emerged from them.

The Road to Myself

Chapter One: Beginnings - Windsor Road

I was born in Maidenhead, England, in 1947, right next to the River Thames opposite Boulters Lock.

Water has been a quiet current in my life ever since. From our windows I could watch the river shift with the seasons: swans gliding in summer, mist rising in winter, the lock gates creaking open and closed like the rhythm of some old heart. For a boy growing up in post-war Britain, it was a world at once small and endless.

Maidenhead itself was still shaking off the war years. In 1949, I had a ration book, its pages a reminder that even as a child, life was measured and controlled. Sweets were precious, food limited. The country was rebuilding, and we were expected to simply accept it.

Before long we moved to Lammas Road in Burnham, just after the war. The house was a solid two-storey place with a tiled roof, with blackout curtains and a corrugated-iron Anderson Shelter left over from the Blitz. For us boys it wasn't a reminder of air raids but a playground — things to drag out into the garden and turn into a den.

We made our own fun then. A huge coal bunker stood at the back of the house, and one of my chores was to bucket coal inside for the fire. I'd climb the tiled roof simply because I could, scrambling up until I stood right on the very top. My mother once came home to find me balanced there, arms spread like a

conqueror. She was horrified; I was fearless. That was me.

We had a dog, a Sealyham terrier, that went a bit funny in the head, and it was my job to track him down in the garden when he wandered, I would find him going around in circles.

While at school I also had a fondness for catching grey squirrels , I would bring them home at holidays, keeping them as pets.

One in particular, called Peta, was my favorite— until the day it escaped. We found it up in a huge weeping willow tree in next door's garden and father went to catch it, only for the squirrel to leap onto his back and when he tried to grab it, the little devil sunk its teeth into his hand.

These squirrels have particularly nasty teeth and powerful jaws for opening nuts. There was a lot of blood and father's wound needed stitches at the hospital, he was not happy with me. I thought he had asked for it. After all, you don't just grab a squirrel bare-handed.

Most of my time was spent with my neighbours — Paul and Richard. We built soapbox carts, hammering together planks and wheels, sending each other flying down the cul-de-sac.

There was a nice old man who had the house at the end of the road and he was always tinkering in his garage. One day we were pushing the soapbox cart down the road and he came out to say hello and when he saw the nails we had put in sticking up he went and got his hammer "You'll get a nasty one stuck in your backside if you're not careful," he warned. He proceeded to bend them over so we wouldn't get hurt.

School, too, left its marks. I went to Grove School, which conveniently backed onto my grandmother's garden. I could slip out down the path and end up at her house, a little escape route that always felt like a secret.

I don't remember much of the lessons, but I do remember poor Robinson being thrown into a patch of stinging nettles. The headmaster, Mr. Gurr, was not amused.

Not all my early memories were mischief. Some were luminous, vivid with the excitement of being alive in a changing world. It was 1953, and the streets of Slough buzzed with anticipation.

Neighbours leaned from windows, flags fluttered from shopfronts, and children craned their necks for a glimpse. Queen Elizabeth II was due to pass down Windsor Road on her way to Windsor Castle, following her coronation.

I was standing there beside Barbara Maylott, one of my teachers at Grove. Barbara was probably just in her twenties, everything a boy could imagine in a first crush, soft voice, gentle smile, eyes that seemed to notice me even in the crowd. While the others shouted and waved, I found myself looking at her more than at the road. For reasons I couldn't yet name, I wanted her attention, her approval, her closeness.

When the Queen's car appeared, the crowd erupted. Flags waved, hats came off, children squealed with delight. And yet, for me, the moment was as much about Barbara as it was about royalty.

The Queen was a distant figure behind glass. Barbara was beside me, real, warm, impossibly close. It was the beginning of something I would spend my life chasing: the strange ache of

wanting not just to be seen, but to be held.

At Easter, my father would take us to the Norfolk Broads, and for a week or two we lived aboard a yacht. Those were the days that fed my imagination — the smell of tarred ropes and wet wood, the creak of the mast at night. I had a little clinker-built dinghy with a lug sail, and I would take it out alone on Hickling Broad near Potter Heigham, no life jacket, no buoyancy, no fear. The adults stayed on the yacht; I pushed out into the open water like a boy chasing his own horizon.

It was on one of those sailing days that I met a man with two false legs, sitting in a traditional Indian canoe. He waved me over, and in my childish curiosity I went. He persuaded me to sit on his lap, part of his canoe, part of his odd little world. But the moment turned strange. He spent his time trying to get either his finger, or something else, up my bum. I slipped off his lap and out of the canoe.

I didn't tell my parents. It wasn't something I thought of as important. It was just another experience, another lesson in the unpredictable currents of life.

My parents weren't harsh, but the times were. Children were shaped more by school than by home, and at nine years old I was sent off to Caldicott, a preparatory boarding school, and my normal family life slipped away. Teachers became the authorities I obeyed, not my parents. That looms large in my memory even now.

(Nearing the end of my life, on reflection, I do not think my parents made a good choice.)

Holidays at home were filled with tension and arguments, and I began to learn that love in my family was conditional, brittle, fragile.

So I sought it elsewhere, at first in crushes and childish games, later in fumbling encounters that left me both thrilled and ashamed. Even as a boy, I felt the gnawing truth: I was searching for something I couldn't quite name, something I thought might fill the hollow left by absent affection.

That search would carry me through schools and marriages, hotel rooms and nightclubs, from Cornwall to France, USA to the Philippines. And it began right there, in 1953, with a boy on Windsor Road who waved at a queen but longed for the smile of a woman standing beside him.

Chapter Two: Caldicot

Leaving Windsor Road meant leaving innocence behind. Caldicott was the place that taught me that authority didn't always mean fairness — and that longing could exist even behind polished shoes and chapel hymns. Rules

In 1956, I was just nine years old when my parents dropped me off at Caldicott, in Farnham Common. I was small, wide-eyed, and frightened, though I did my best not to show it. Caldicott had the aura of an "elite" boys' school, grand, polished, and proud of the success of its pupils. But underneath the smart blazers and Latin lessons, there was something else, something harder to name.

Nights were the hardest. The senior dormitory was a place of bravado and mischief. Sometimes boys stripped naked and jumped from bed to bed, a game of dares and jeers.

We laughed, but behind the noise was a kind of hunger, a hunger for touch, for connection, even if we didn't understand it. I remember the confusion of reaching out, grabbing at another boy in play, not quite knowing what I was searching for but knowing it filled a gap, however briefly.

Meals were another matter entirely. Food was institutional: porridge that clung to the spoon, bread that tasted faintly of soap, stews with bones, I think they were rabbit but I will stand corrected if it was something else, and gristle floated to the top. Hunger was a constant companion, and I learned early how to hoard biscuits, how to trade favours for scraps. It was survival training disguised as schooling.

At lunch times we used to have to line up in the gymnasium and silence was strictly enforced. If you whispered or spoke to somebody you'd be punished and the punishment was hanging on the wall bars and by the time there were two or three boys up there it looked like a scene from a film like Spartacus.

While I was at Caldicott, I discovered something that fascinated me. In a small turret at the front of the school was a magnificent butterfly collection — glass-fronted cases filled with colour and wonder. There must have been at least eight of them, each one carefully pinned and labelled, a miniature museum hidden in plain sight.

Being the nosy boy I was, I crept up there more than once to look at them. The beauty of those wings — delicate blues, burnished oranges, iridescent greens — felt like a secret world away from the grey routine of school life.

Of course, I was eventually caught and sent to the headmaster.

In those days, curiosity had its price. I was told to take down my trousers and bend over the arm of his couch. "Six of the best," as they called it, came down hard.

That night in the dormitory, I checked in the mirror — six angry red lines across my backside, burning reminders of a world where even wonder came with punishment.

One figure stood out in my early days there: Peter Wright. At the time he was my French and Sports teacher, tall and with a limp, self-assured, and admired by many boys. He seemed to have everything—a confidence that bordered on arrogance, and of course, the car: a blue Jaguar XK150. To a young boy, it was dazzling.

I remember the day he took me to a gymnastics competition in it. I sat stiffly in the passenger seat, equal parts thrilled and unsettled. He was offering attention, a kind of approval, and at nine years old, I was hungry for that.

Wright's room was next to my dormitory. Every week we went in there to watch "Hancock's Half Hour" on the television, a rare treat then. It seemed harmless at the time, but there was always a current of unease I couldn't put into words.

One night, without warning, he came into the dorm, yanked back my covers, and poured a pint of cold water over me. To this day, I don't know why. Perhaps it was because another boy was in my bed, hiding under the blankets. Was that my crime? Was that why I deserved a soaking? I didn't dare ask.

At the time, I shrugged it off. That was what boys at boarding school did, we endured, we learned not to question, we kept our heads down.

It wasn't until decades later that the full horror of Wright's behaviour came to light. In 2014, he was sentenced to eight years in prison for sexually abusing several boys at Caldicott between 1959 and 1970. Whisky, fast cars, charm, and secrecy were his tools. Behind the polished image of a respected, now headmaster, he was systematically preying on children.

When the news broke, other former pupils came forward, and more teachers were eventually convicted, one of them actually threw himself under a train. Reading those reports made me feel physically sick. The scale of what had been hidden for so long was staggering.

I had walked those same corridors, slept in those same dormitories, sat in the same classrooms, unaware of what some of those boys had endured just beyond my own small circle. It was like discovering that your childhood home had been built over something rotten.

For years, I had carried unease without understanding it. Now I did. It wasn't imagination, it wasn't childish fear, it was intuition. Wright's shadow had fallen over us all, whether we knew it or not.

For me, it was like looking back through a distorted mirror. My memories, of the Jaguar, of the television evenings, of the cold water shocking me awake, suddenly took on a darker hue. They were fragments of the same story, a story I had survived without fully realising how close I had come to its centre.

Caldicott was meant to prepare boys for greatness. Indeed, some of its old boys went on to become figures of public life, Nick Clegg, Andrew Strauss, and others whose names filled

newspapers for brighter reasons.

But that glossy reputation was built on silence, on what was left unspoken. Beneath the veneer, the school had harboured predators, and Wright was only one. Three more teachers were later convicted of child sex offences, confirming what many of us had suspected but could not say as boys.

I sometimes wonder why Wright never went further with me. Was it chance? Was it something he saw—or didn't see—in me? I will never know. What I do know is that even without the worst of his abuse, I still carry the weight of Caldicott. That cold water soaking me in the dark, the humiliation, the confusion, the whispered fear, it all stayed with me, long after the covers had dried.

During one of our maths lessons, the master, Mr. Anderson, called me up to his desk. He drove an old MG, a TC or maybe a TD; I can't quite remember which. He was a formal man, precise in speech and always slightly impatient, the kind who made you nervous before he even opened his mouth.

He asked for my home address. My mother had just told me that we were moving from Lammas Road to Dorney Wood Road in Burnham. I don't think the move had actually happened yet, but in my eagerness to appear grown-up, and perhaps to impress him, I gave the *new* address.

He nodded and said he intended to write to my father about my maths results. My stomach dropped. For the rest of the day I worried that I'd given him the wrong address, that the letter might vanish into thin air, or worse, reveal me as dishonest.

As it turned out, everything was fine. But I never forgot that

small moment of panic, one of those lessons you don't find in textbooks: how even a harmless untruth can feel enormous when you're a boy.

Years later, when I was grown, I met George Anderson again at the Empress of India pub in Farnham Common. By 2002 it had been renamed "The Emperor", after too many people mistook it for an Indian restaurant. Back in my Caldicott days, I'd liked him, as I had Mr. Dunstable, even after the time he cuffed me around the head for being cheeky. He apologised afterward, and I still thought of him as one of the good ones: strict, but fair.

Opposite our house in Burnham was a farm owned by a man connected somehow with Shooting Times, a shareholder or perhaps a director, I never quite knew. The farm itself was run by Chris, the brother of my sister's boyfriend, and every month, during the season, they held large shooting parties.

On one occasion I was invited to join them. I must have been about twelve, eager to impress and far too young to know what I was getting into.

At Caldicott, Peter Wright, owned a handsome side-by-side .410 shotgun. I mentioned the shoot to him, and to my surprise, he offered to lend it to me. Looking back, I can't help but wonder "why". With all that we now know of Wright, it seems extraordinary that he'd entrust a twelve-year-old boy with a valuable weapon.

What did I do, or not do—to earn that privilege? I can't remember. Perhaps I've simply blocked out what I did. Perhaps there was nothing. Perhaps it's better that I never truly know.

The shoot itself was a proper affair. I was told it was a "cocks-

only" day, which meant no hens were to be taken. We moved in a line through a kale field, dogs darting ahead, guns poised. I was too slow for the first few birds, and one of the men beside me said, "Don't be so nervous, lad!"

So when the next pheasant burst from the cover, I raised the gun, fired, and dropped it clean. My heart leapt—until the dogs returned with the bird. A hen. My first kill, and already the wrong one. The men laughed, but I felt a sinking mix of pride and shame that stayed with me all afternoon.

When I returned to Caldicott after the holidays, I handed Wright his shotgun back. That same day, we had our routine medical examination. It was the usual ritual—strip to the waist, line up, wait your turn. When my turn came, the nurse, young and smiling, asked me to drop my trousers and cough while she held my testicles.

I never did understand what that was meant to diagnose. All I remember is the mix of surprise and fascination—the strange jolt of excitement that felt entirely new, and the way she smiled, kind but knowing.

The school also ran a scout troop, and you were expected to join. Of course, me being me, I refused, along with five other boys. We called ourselves the "Purple Six".

On scout afternoons, I think it was a Friday, we had to wander the grounds picking up litter while the others camped, tied knots, and played at soldiering. We thought ourselves rebels, superior in our refusal.

That bravado didn't last long. One week the scoutmaster set up a project down in the woods where a small lake glistened

through the trees. Ropes were tied over the water, and the boys swung out and across like adventurers. I was transfixed. The sight of them flying over the water lit something inside me. My rebellion melted away, and I abandoned the Purple Six in disgrace to join the Scouts.

Once inside, I discovered another kind of education, one not found in any timetable. When the weather turned foul, we'd gather in one of the smaller canvas tents, huddling together against the damp. It was there I first witnessed what they called a "demonstration of manhood." One of the boys, Simon, could do what the rest of us only half understood: he could ejaculate. He would stand, bold as brass, in the centre of our circle and masturbated all the way to the result, the the rest of us watched in awe.

To us, it was astonishing, something halfway between science and magic. At that age, most of us couldn't even imagine such a thing for ourselves. It was shocking, thrilling, and strange — a mix of excitement and fascination I couldn't name.

In the summer we had sports day. I was good at some things but my crowning glory was the half mile race. The boy who had the bed next to me in dormitory was one of Peter Wright's favourites, and he was expected to win.

Well as it so happened I walked all over Rob and won easily, it didn't make me popular with Peter Wright, our sports teacher, but it gave me third place in the overall point system, so I won a cup with my name on it. I guess you can't have everything!

Wright never molested me, not in the way he did others and I liked him. But he left his mark. His sudden bursts of cruelty, the strange way he looked at us, the way he seemed to hover too

close, it all added up to something that never felt right.

Caldicot was just the beginning. From there, I would go on to Seaford College in Sussex, and later into the world as a young man.

Looking back, Caldicott was the start of my education in more than books. It taught me about power and silence, about fear and survival. Those years shaped the way I saw the world, authority, trust, intimacy, and they left marks that only time and understanding could soften.

I didn't know it then, but I was already learning to carry pain quietly, to look for comfort where I could find it, and to keep moving forward. Those lessons would follow me through Seaford and far beyond, echoing through a life that, in its own way, became a search for love and belonging.

Chapter Three: Seaford College

If Caldicott was about rules and unease, then Seaford was about mischief and awakening. By the time I arrived as a member of Millburgh House, I was older, restless, and ripe for trouble.

Seaford itself sat in Lavington Park. The original house was an Elizabethan manor built in 1587. It was later rebuilt between 1790 and 1794, then extended again around 1900 by James Buchanan, who would later become Lord Woolavington.

Seaford College, founded in 1884 in the seaside town of Seaford, East Sussex, eventually relocated to Lavington Park in 1946, where it remains today. The estate, set in more than four hundred acres of rolling Sussex countryside near Petworth,

became an idyllic yet formidable home for the school, complete with rugby pitches, hockey fields, and a running track stretching across the parkland.

The nearby St Peter's parish church was adopted as the school chapel, adding a sense of history and continuity to the place.

During the Second World War, before Seaford arrived, Lavington Park had served a very different purpose, it was used by the Special Boat Squadron (SBS), and in the spring of 1944, the Commando Group Headquarters was relocated there. The echoes of that military past still seemed to linger in the air when I arrived years later.

When you arrived at Seaford as a new boy, you were assigned an "uncle", an older student meant to show you the ropes. My uncle was Rob, the very same Rob who, as I later discovered, was also the one tangled up with Sarah.

Rob was helpful enough at first. He warned me about the upcoming music test, explaining that if I sang well, I'd be recruited into the school choir, which, though an honour on paper, meant losing a great deal of precious free time to endless rehearsals.

So when the day of my singing assessment arrived, I made sure to sabotage my chances. Though I'd once been part of the choir at Caldicott and could carry a tune, I deliberately sang off-key, missing every note I could. The music master smiled politely, thanked me for my effort, and that was the end of it.

I'd successfully avoided the choir, and preserved my freedom.

Some of us were allowed to bring our go-karts to school, mine

was a small, noisy contraption powered by a 90cc engine. It was kept in a shed near the gymnasium, and when I wanted to use it, I'd take it out for a spin down the long drive to the go-kart track. The run itself, several hundred metres each way, along the metal road that cut through the estate, was perhaps the best part of the afternoon. The wind in my face, the roar of that tiny engine echoing off the trees, it felt like freedom, a world away from classrooms and rules.

Every year the school held what were called "Standards," a sort of internal sports challenge. Each boy had to take part, whether he wanted to or not. The standard was set for a particular event, and that year it happened to be the javelin. I liked it and was good at it. On the afternoon of the test, the throwing area had been marked out with lines, A, B, C and D, each one representing a grade of success. Most boys landed between B and C, a few earned a B, and only the best managed an A.

Those waiting their turn stood, foolishly, just beyond the A line, close to the landing area so they could fetch their javelins quickly. I warned the supervising master that they should step back, but he waved me off. I threw hard, the javelin slicing through the air, and it buried itself in the ground less than two feet from one of the boys. He could easily have been killed. The master blamed me, of course, though I'd done everything right. That was life at school, reckless, sometimes unfair, but never dull.

I doubt such things would be allowed now, what with modern safety rules and endless regulations. Back then, danger was part of the fun.

I became something of a master at catching young squirrels too.

There was the vastness of the South Downs acting as a backdrop to the school. On quiet afternoons I'd vanish there in search of adventure. I'd spot a baby squirrel, light grey, quick as a spark, darting up a tree, and I'd give chase. Once, in my enthusiasm, I grabbed at a branch I knew was rotten, but it was too late to stop myself. The branch snapped, and I crashed down between two trunks, wedged painfully in the narrow V where they met.

The pain was sharp, and I knew I'd cracked a rib or two, but I couldn't tell anyone. I was out of bounds, and admitting where I'd been would have earned me more than a scolding. So I gritted my teeth, straightened my blazer, and limped back to the dormitory as if nothing had happened.

For days, every breath was a reminder of that fall, and of the stubborn streak that ran through me even then.

One of my trophies from squirrel hunting became my pet, a lively little fellow who often travelled with me tucked inside the inner pocket of my blazer. During morning assembly one day, as we stood singing hymns, he decided he'd had enough of confinement. I felt him wriggling to get out and tried to nudge him back in, but he was determined.

With a sudden burst of freedom, he shot down my leg, paused neatly on the floor, and, to my horror, started peeing, right there between the rows of boys. Then, as if nothing had happened, he scampered straight back up my leg and disappeared into his pocket home.

I could hardly keep a straight face. A model of independence, I thought, and, in his own way, rather well-trained.

But it wasn't the sports or the lessons that shaped me at Seaford, it was life at Millburgh Hall, our accommodation, four miles from the main school. That distance gave us freedom. We were out of sight, out of mind, and we filled the space with a curriculum of our own: dares, secrets, and reckless adventures.

One of the episodes that cemented my reputation came courtesy of a gift from my mother: a roulette wheel, complete with a numbered cloth. We laid it out in the seniors' study, and soon juniors were sneaking in to gamble, eyes wide, coins clutched in their hands. I was the ringleader, spinning the wheel, taking the bets, enjoying the sense of power. For a while, it felt harmless, mischief, fun, a rebellion against the dull grind of school life.

But debts began to mount. When some boys couldn't pay, the wagers shifted to sexual favours, fumbling, confused acts traded for release from what they owed. At the time, I didn't think of it as exploitation. To me it was part of the heady mix of hormones, risk, and curiosity that ran through our days. But the housemaster thought otherwise.

I was hauled up and made an example of, the first boy in seven years to receive a public beating. The cane lashed across my backside in front of the house, punishment not only for gambling but for "taking advantage." It stung, in every sense, but part of me wore it as a badge. I had broken through the rules in a way no one else had dared.

The public beating didn't bother me as much as you might think. If anything, it boosted my street cred, as kids would say today. I never told my parents about it, it wasn't their concern, and I simply got on with life.

Still, it seemed to mark me in some way. I was never made a prefect, though most boys my age eventually were. Whether that was coincidence or quiet punishment, I'll never know. Perhaps I'd upset someone a little too much, but that, too, was life at school. You learned your lessons, sometimes the hard way, and carried on.

Not all our mischief was hidden. At the centre of much of our attention was the housemaster's daughter, Sarah. She had long flowing hair, which she would comb in front of her mirror sitting on a stool, naked, her curtains left open to the night. Whether it was innocent forgetfulness or calculated teasing, we never knew, but to us boys it was an irresistible spectacle.

We'd climb out of the bathroom window onto the flat roof, balancing precariously on the ledge, leaning around the wall to catch a glimpse. Hearts pounded, whispers hissed, "Go on, Pete, don't be a chicken." I muttered back, "Shut it, she'll see us!" but my eyes never left the glass. It was our own secret cinema, more electrifying than anything in the outside world.

One night I let curiosity get the better of me. Her room was on the same floor as Dormitory One, and the corridor was dark except for the faint glow of a lamp spilling from under the door. My heart was thumping, that peculiar mixture of excitement and fear that only youth can summon.

I crept closer, hardly daring to breathe. But, with my hand on the doorknob about to turn it, I heard it, a sound, soft but unmistakable, creaking mattress springs, followed by moans then a voice I recognised at once. It was Rob, my so-called "uncle," the same Rob who'd warned me about the choir and pretended to look out for me.

He was in there giving her his best.

It hit me with a strange mix of shock and envy. Rob, the one I'd looked up to, the one who'd seemed worldly and untouchable, was already living out the fantasies the rest of us only whispered about. I stood there frozen, torn between fascination and humiliation, then slipped back down the corridor before anyone saw me.

Later, I learned that my father had worked with Rob's father for a time, both employed by Northern Aluminium, though I can't be sure now; my father's long gone and memory has its tricks. But that night, those connections meant nothing. What mattered was that I'd seen too much and understood too little.

It was one of those moments that stayed with me, the raw, bewildering intersection of desire, jealousy, and discovery.

Life at Millburgh was like that, half comedy, half catastrophe.

I found a kind of outlet in the dormitory. The bed next to mine belonged to Steve, a boy I wasn't particularly close to at first, yet something unspoken seemed to draw us together.

One night I slipped into his bed, and he didn't turn me away. We lay close, our naked bodies feeling the warmth both strange and comforting. In that closeness, I found a release I didn't yet understand, not just physical, but emotional. There was touching, fumbling, a rush of heat, and the sticky aftermath of my orgasm. It happened and I don't think I entered him or even tried to.

What began as curiosity grew into something gentler, a kind of affection, like a sort of love match. I desperately needed to be

wanted, to be accepted, and for a while I believed I had found that with him.

We spend these nighttime assignations kissing and fondling each other's body, I liked to feel between his legs and hold him. I was just full of testosterone, I needed to be able to release all my pent up hormones, and Steve knew it, the warmth of skin, the whisper of breath, the comfort of knowing someone wanted you near.

By day, we never spoke of it. We shared the same dormitory, went to classes, and joined the noise and chaos of school life as if nothing had happened. But at night, when the lights went out and the dormitory settled into silence, we would find each other again, embracing with kisses, tongues awkward but electric, me probing between his legs in desperation.

Looking back, I don't think it was about being "gay" or not, we didn't even have words for it then. It was about need, about discovery, about finding connection in a place that was otherwise so cold. It was a secret curriculum no master had written, and it taught me that desire, in all its forms, is rarely about sex alone. It's about the simple, aching wish to be held.

My secret nights with Steve didn't stay secret for long. Word has a way of travelling in a boarding school. One afternoon I was summoned to the Head Prefect's study, a place that always carried an air of quiet judgment.

He began with a lecture on "homosexual behaviour," as he called it, and the dangers that came with it, diseases, disgrace, a ruined future. He never said how much he actually knew, or whether someone had told tales, but the implication was clear.

Someone had squealed.

I listened, nodding in all the right places, though inside I was half amused, half defiant. To him, it was a moral crisis. To me, it had been curiosity, warmth in a cold dormitory, comfort between two boys who didn't yet understand what they were doing. He told me it would "ruin my life." Fat chance, I thought.

What it really did was open a door, not to shame, but to awareness. We were all discovering who we were, in the shadows and silences of adolescence. Some never admitted it; some never even dared. I did, at least, have that small, dangerous taste of truth.

Perhaps our most daring escapade involved Mr. Ellerton's car. Left unattended, it was too tempting. One night we crept into his garage, rolled the vehicle silently down the drive, and bump-started it on the road. We tore down quiet country lanes, grinning like lunatics, kings of the world behind the wheel. Reckless beyond belief, but intoxicating. Somehow, we got it back into the garage without being discovered.

Religion was another constant at Seaford. I had been baptised a Christian, with a certificate somewhere that declared me "A Soldier for Jesus."

Within the grounds stood a small but beautiful church, used by locals as well as us boys. Two services on Sunday were compulsory, no exceptions. Six mornings a week we also gathered for assembly, where amid the announcements we sang hymns and endured a sermon.

The school attracted boys from many backgrounds, sons of diplomats, children of families from overseas. I doubt they were

all Christian, but their faiths went unrecognised.

Religious Education and a collective act of worship for all pupils, was a legal requirement, and in those days it meant Bible study and nothing else. Diversity wasn't even imagined.

As for the religious education I receive, I can't remember much about it, which probably says everything. We all attended it because we had to, but it never meant anything to me. I suppose I cut it out of my mind.

My parents went further, during holidays, sending me to a Sunday school group called "Crusaders". There we were drenched in more Bible stories, more hymns, more talk of sin and salvation. Looking back, it was indoctrination rather than education. And yet, it neither made me religious nor turned me into an atheist. If anything, I grew into something between, an agnostic, perhaps.

I've never been religious, though I do believe in the power of thought, in how the mind can shape your life. To me, religion was just another form of indoctrination, like so much else we were taught. Belief, guilt, obedience, all of it lived in the head, not in the heavens. Sex, faith, fear, they all stem from the same place: the stories we tell ourselves, and what we choose to believe.

But science lessons were also to be enjoyed. In Biology we learned about bodies and how they worked, but Chemistry had its own dark magnetism, things that seemed far more interesting to a couple of boys with too much time and curiosity. Of course, learning about them felt like an invitation to try.

I can't remember the exact recipe, and I certainly wouldn't write it down now, but we cobbled together a powder that promised fireworks. For a barrel we used a length of steel pipe and screwed it to plumbing fittings, nailed firmly to a chunky timber block, drilled a charge hole where a fuse might go. Then we melted a lump of lead into something that would pass for a bullet and rammed it into the barrel after the powder.

We marched out to the woods at the back of the school, installed the Jetex fuse and lit it and ran for cover, hearts hammering.

The explosion that followed was enormous, thrilling and terrifying all at once. The makeshift cannon disintegrated into pieces; the projectile vanished into the trunk of a nearby tree, never to be recovered. We had, in a sense, proved the experiment. It was a success of sorts, and, for a while at least, the purest kind of fun.

There were girls, too, though they hovered at the edges of our lives. We snuck across the road to watch them playing tennis at the girls' school, teased by a lifted skirt or the glimpse of a thigh. One night I climbed a fire escape to peer through their window, heart hammering, breath caught between fear and desire. I never dared go in. Something always held me back, morality, fear, or perhaps the sense that what I craved wasn't found in stolen glimpses.

During holidays my world widened. At Burnham Beeches swimming pool, I played in the water with Mary Lou and her friend Vanessa. Mary Lou's father kept a pub nearby, and I wanted her with a hunger I couldn't name.

When possible we climbed to the top floor of his barn, straw bales stacked around us. We lay down in the straw and she was waiting for me to make a move. I wanted to touch her, to feel her skin, to cross the threshold into adulthood. But fear held me back.

At school we'd been lectured about venereal diseases, syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia, contracted through sexual contact we were also warned of the weight of pregnancy and responsibility.

My longing remained untouched. She was my first glimpse of intimacy that was real, possible, and terrifying.

At school we froze in classrooms, we spied from rooftops, we borrowed cars and dared each other into ever greater risks. We laughed endlessly, but beneath the humour something serious was happening. I was beginning to mistake sex for intimacy, thrill for love, risk for connection.

Some boys didn't fit in and simply couldn't take it and tried to escape. When someone ran away, that was usually the last we saw of them, ran off quietly, never to return.

But there was one exception. I still remember a boy named Garner. He ran away once and was brought back. Not long after, he ran again, and again they returned him. The third time, he was gone for good. We never saw him after that.

I sometimes wonder what his parents thought they were achieving by forcing him back. The poor lad was trying to tell them something, but no one was listening. He wasn't made for this kind of life, maybe not for any kind of boarding school. Some boys were just too gentle, too sensitive, for this kind of regime.

Looking back to my time there, Seaford was more than a school, it was an early mirror of life itself. A place where boundaries were tested, authority was both feared and defied, and the first questions of who I was began to stir.

It was there that I learned how thin the line is between curiosity and consequence, between longing and love. The lessons weren't written in books; they were carved into the moments of risk, pain, and discovery that shaped me.

Everything that came after, the wanderings, the women, the endless search for belonging, can be traced back to those corridors and cold dormitories at Seaford. It was there I first mistook rebellion for freedom, and only much later learned the difference.

By the time I left Seaford in 1964, I had passed my driving test and felt like a man, though in truth I was still very much a boy, restless, conflicted, carrying both guilt and desire in equal measure. Seaford had shown me freedom, danger, and the possibility of love. But it had also left me hungry, still searching, still unsure what love really was or where I might find it.

Chapter Four – First Love, First Loss

All that bravado I learned at Seaford melted the first time I fell in love, or whatever else you call it. Nothing at school had prepared me for the ache of wanting someone who could undo me with a smile.

I was going eighteen years old, diploma in hand, driving test passed, thinking myself ready for the world. What I really was,

though, was restless, desperate to step into the freedom I had only tasted in secret.

At nineteen, I found myself often in Windsor, drawn to the music and nightlife, it could be the Ricky Tick, famous for hosting The Who and Georgie Fame or Skinners nightclub, with a dimly lit dance floor where the girls hung out.

Skinners was notorious, smoky air, women in their best dresses, men leaning against the bar trying to look older and more confident than they were. For me, it was intoxicating. After years of being told when to wake, when to eat, when to sleep, here was a place where the night itself seemed wide open.

It was at Skinners that I met Issi. She was bright, attractive, self-assured in a way that made my heart race. She laughed easily, and when she turned her smile on me, I felt seen in a way I hadn't before.

We spent evenings together, sometimes with her friend Sue, sometimes with my mate Pete-B, as I called him. Soon, Issi became more than just a dance partner.

One night, staying at her parents' house in Colnbrook, I crept into her room. It was awkward, uncertain, thrilling. I remember fumbling, learning her body, daring to taste her with clumsy courage laying between her legs and finally slipping inside her.

We had no protection, I barely thought about consequences in those moments. What mattered was that for the first time, I wasn't just imagining or stealing glances. I was actually having full blown sex with a beautiful woman, with all the closeness and confusion that came with it.

We eventually got married, church and everything. From those nights with Issi came my first daughter, Rachel.

But before Rachel there was loss, our first pregnancy ended in miscarriage. I remember the pain of it, though at the time I didn't know how to comfort Issi, or even myself. I was too young, too wrapped up in my own desires and my own mistakes to offer the kind of steadiness she needed.

As a way of helping Issi recover from the miscarriage, I suggested we go on holiday.

I had just bought a Jaguar E-Type 4.2 soft-top, and the idea of open roads and new scenery seemed like the best medicine. We packed the car, the boot crammed with bags, and set off north for Scotland to visit my younger sister, whose husband was stationed at Faslane with the Royal Navy.

The drive itself felt like part of the cure. The E-Type was everything I'd dreamed of, long bonnet, "phallic perfection", stretching into the distance, exhaust note rumbling like thunder, the rush of wind in our hair. For me, it was freedom distilled into steel and leather.

For Issi, perhaps less so. She would sit beside me with her hair in tangles, rolling her eyes as another stretch of moorland blurred past. "All I ever see is heather," she complained more than once. And it was true, I loved driving that car too much to slow down. What to me was joy and escape, to her was a blur of purple slopes flashing by at something over seventy miles an hour.

But even if we saw it differently, that trip mattered. The road unwound beneath us, carrying us away from grief, at least for a little while. Scotland's empty landscapes, the lochs glinting in

the sun, the sudden smell of pine in the air, they gave us space to breathe.

The car was part of it, a cocoon of noise and speed, but so was the silence of the highlands when we finally stopped. For a few days, life felt lighter, as though the past could be left in the slipstream.

Cars charted my progress as surely as schools and jobs did. At one point, I almost bought a Jaguar XK140, a curvaceous sports car straight out of a dream. I even took it for a test drive, the exhaust note echoing in my bones, but the price, £110, was beyond me.

Instead, I settled into the world of the Mark 2 saloons. First came the 2.4, bought for £62. Slow by Jaguar standards, perhaps, but to me it was a revelation. The smell of leather, the walnut dash, the original toolkit tucked into the driver's door, it made me feel like I had arrived. Then came the 3.4, sharper and faster, and finally the 3.8, the true outlaw's car. That one could fly. Bank robbers and barristers both loved them, and I could see why.

Through the years I owned more Jaguars, each one reflecting where I was in life. The last of them was an S-Type, followed by an XF, smooth, modern, and a world away from the growl and menace of the old Mk 2s.

Now, at age seventy eight and in the Philippines, I potter around in a 1994 Nissan compact. It's practical, reliable, utterly unglamorous, and I smile at the contrast. Once I tore down country lanes in cars that made the earth shake; now I drive something that barely ruffles the air.

Cars were only part of the story. They gave me freedom, but freedom always demands to be used. By the mid-1960s, the world outside school was changing faster than anyone could keep up with. The Beatles were everywhere, skirts were rising, music was louder, life seemed brighter. For the first time, I felt not like a boy playing at rebellion, but a young man stepping into it.

I worked where I could, learning the trades of life as much as the trade of business. The motor world pulled me in: buying, selling, fixing, moving cars along for a profit. I wasn't a mechanic by nature, but I had an instinct for deals, for turning an opportunity into a little cash in my pocket. Some cars I loved, some were just stepping stones, but every one of them added to the sense that I was moving forward.

There were women, too, or at least, the beginnings of them. Flirtations, dances, evenings that promised more than they delivered. I was curious, restless, wanting closeness but often mistaking it for sex.

It was the rhythm of the decade: try everything, hold nothing too tightly, see what stuck.

Yet under the laughter and the late nights was the same question that had followed me since Grove School, since Barbara Maylott: was this love, or was I still chasing something I couldn't name?

Looking back, those years after Seaford feel like a blur of movement. Cars, girls, late-night drives, half-baked schemes. The 1960s were in full swing, The words of the past prime minister ,Harold McMillan, ring in my ears "never had it so

good" maybe he was right and I was swinging with them, not yet grounded, not yet settled, but testing myself against the world. Scotland had shown me escape, Jaguars had shown me freedom, and life was beginning to show me the cost of both.

Our relationship didn't last. That was my fault. I chased distractions, strayed, let the search for love slip into the search for novelty. Issi was strong, and when she finally walked away, she took Rachel with her, across the ocean to America. I lost not just her, but my daughter too, the first fracture in the family life I claimed to want but never managed to hold.

Looking back, I see Issi as a turning point. With her, I learned that sex and love aren't the same thing, no matter how much a young man wishes them to be. I learned that choices have consequences, not just for myself but for others. And I learned the ache of absence, the weight of knowing a child of mine was growing up far away, out of reach, a stranger to me.

That ache never fully went away. It became another thread in the tapestry of my searching, pulling me forward, driving me into marriages, affairs, escapes, always chasing the love I had glimpsed but failed to hold onto.

Issi was my first real love, and my first real loss. And though our time together was short, she left me with the lesson I would relearn again and again: that love, once broken, leaves a scar that no amount of searching can erase.

Chapter Five: Crackington Manor

Love's lessons followed me to Crackington Manor, where

marriage, lust, and longing collided under one roof, and where I began to understand how easily desire can disguise loneliness.

My mother had bought a hotel near Bude in Cornwall, Crackington Manor, and it became, for a time, the backdrop of my young married life. Although Issi and I had tied the knot, it wasn't the kind of marriage that grew roots. We were together, yes, but not in the way I had always dreamed family might be.

By the time I was twenty-three, Issi and I had parted ways. My daughter Rachel was in America, and I was adrift again, restless and full of longing.

The hotel itself was a magnet for temptation. Guests came and went, their lives brushing against mine in fleeting encounters, each one stirring something in me.

Young women worked the summers, students with bright eyes and mischievous smiles, and I was forever trying to get into their pants, chasing intimacy in hallways and whispered conversations. It was never just lust, though it looked like it. It was the hunger to be wanted, to feel close to someone, even if only for a night.

A friend of mine from my motor trading days came down one Sunday with a girlfriend in tow. She was a pretty little thing with freckles, and they looked the part together.

In the morning I carried them tea while they were still in bed. She had taken off her makeup overnight, and I could hardly recognise her. The freckles were still there, but the rest of her seemed like a different girl entirely.

Martin drove her home that same day, and by evening he was

back, with another one. He did the same thing two more times that week, each time with a different companion, each as temporary as the last. I watched him with a mixture of amusement and mild disbelief.

Some people just can't make their minds up. But as I thought about it, I wondered: was I any different?

This was before the days of computers and printers, when bookings came by post. We advertised in a little guidebook called "Pets Welcome" and my mother insisted that every letter be answered first thing each morning, properly, of course, in neat handwriting and polite tone. "Presentation matters," she'd say, and she was right.

Crackington was part hotel, part madhouse, part family business. It had been a mill once, and a large pond still sat beside it, slightly higher than the main building. One winter, after days of rain, the mill pond overflowed and flooded the basement kitchen. Muddy water poured through the doors, ruining the fridges, shorting the electrics, and spoiling everything in the deep freeze. We had to replace the lot. Out of that disaster, we finally installed a walk-in fridge and freezer, the most modern thing in the place.

Winter had other surprises too. A rat once chewed through the black alkathene pipe that fed the roof tank, and water cascaded through the ceilings, soaking bedrooms and carpets. Another day, a storm ripped slates from the roof, letting rain pour into the top corridor. We spent as much time drying out the building as running it.

We had a maintenance man who worked alongside me,

patching and fixing whatever broke. One afternoon, a guest in Room 10 reported a problem, so he set off with his tool bag and a saw under his arm. Believing the room empty, he pushed the door open, only to find a couple in the middle of their "afternoon delight". The man was sprawled naked on the bed, the woman astride him, equally unclothed. The maintenance man froze, panicked, and tried to back out, but the door swung shut behind him, trapping the saw handle against the wall. He was jammed there for several seconds, red-faced and flustered, before wriggling free. According to him, the woman never missed a beat.

That corridor seemed cursed. Room 10 was on the left, a toilet straight ahead, and another room opposite. A friend of mine brought his brother and a couple of Green Berets down one weekend, and after heavy drinking one of them went upstairs to use the toilet. For some reason, there was a sheet of broken glass leaning against the wall. He stumbled, fell, and landed straight on it, gashing himself badly. There was laughter, disbelief, and later, a few stitches.

Even the opposite room had its moment. A couple arrived to find their room swarming with tiny black flies. They'd left the window open, and the evergreen tree outside had drawn them in. We moved the couple to another room, fumigated, and cleaned for hours before it was fit for human life again.

Not all the chaos came from guests. I caused a fair share myself. One night I crept into a staff bedroom, where Jane was asleep in a bunk bed. I woke her, wearing only a dressing gown, and things escalated quickly. She pulled me onto the bed, and soon the whole frame was shaking so violently I thought it might

collapse. Somehow it held. I escaped with my life, and a grin.

Another winter we decided to upgrade the Manor, converting a row of three small bedrooms into two rooms with private bathrooms. I did the plumbing myself, proud of my new copper pipes. As I nailed the floorboards back down, I managed to drive not one, but six nails straight through the fresh pipework. With no spares, I patched every hole with solder and hoped for the best. Miraculously, it worked, mostly.

Our two chambermaids, Cath and Doreen, were both local and cheerful, until Doreen left. After that, the housekeeper complained that the bedrooms smelled "like unwashed bodies." It turned out Doreen had been spraying air freshener behind Cath to hide the smell. When confronted, Cath's aunt arrived the next day to defend her niece's honour, and that was the last we saw of either of them.

Then there was the man who came downstairs complaining that there were dog hairs in his bed. I apologised and offered to change it immediately. He looked amazed, as if expecting me to shrug and tell him to sleep around them. People are funny creatures.

Crackington had its share of dogs, and they often caused more drama than the guests. One family's enormous Labrador would lie across the main doorway, blocking everyone's way. The owner told me, "Just say "beep beep" and he'll move." Sure enough, he did, so we put up a sign: "Please say beep beep to gain access."

Another regular brought a black Labrador that snarled and lunged at everyone in the lounge, dragging its owner helplessly

behind. Not all dogs, it seemed, were fit for polite society.

Down near the car park I kept a few pigs, and one winter I brought a sickly piglet into the Red Lounge to keep warm by the fire. The dog liked to lie there too, but the pig had no respect for rank. He'd wedge his snout under the dog's backside and push until the dog gave up the warm spot. The guests adored him.

Not all guests were as endearing. One man, drunk on Pernod, vomited spectacularly all over his room. The stench was indescribable. I cut out the carpet, replaced the underlay, still it lingered. In the end I had to replace the floorboards themselves. Some smells, like some mistakes, run deep.

The Manor was full of quirks. The bar sat just off the hall, opposite the Green Lounge. One afternoon, a regular arrived and went to open the lounge door. The brass knob came off in his hand. "Good to be back," he said cheerfully. "It's been like that for two years." After hearing that, I couldn't very well fix it, so I put a nail through it and left it as tradition.

The last guests of one season were a honeymoon couple, still glowing with new love. The next year they returned with a baby daughter. We didn't see them for several years, and when they came back, it broke my heart. The wife had developed rheumatoid arthritis, was swollen from medication, and sat in a wheelchair. But her husband stood by her, patient and tender. Watching them, I saw a kind of love I'd never quite managed, the sort that endures.

A friend of mine from my motor trading days came down one Sunday with a girlfriend in tow. She was a pretty little thing with

freckles, and they looked the part together.

In the morning I carried them tea while they were still in bed. She had taken off her makeup overnight, and I could hardly recognise her. The freckles were still there, but the rest of her seemed like a different girl entirely.

There were parties at Crackington too, raucous nights that spilled into skinny-dipping swims. I remember one in particular: a friend pushed me into the cold pool, I was shivering, holding onto a naked girl in the water.

We stumbled out, dripping, into a bedroom, but the cold had robbed me of everything. I stripped off and tried to do what a young man should in these situations but my equipment would not rise to the occasion, I failed and I was still shivering, I felt humiliated and my pride had received a severe knock.

She laughed it off but played with my useless member and there was a sticky result, but the sting stayed with me. I drove her back to her campsite, knowing she had a boyfriend waiting. I was chasing closeness in the wrong places, and always ending up emptier.

Issi caught me once, in the wrong bed at the wrong time. I had slipped under the covers with a nurse who had been staying at the Manor, clothes discarded, desire ready to take over. Liz's voice came down the hallway, calling my name. I froze. "I'm here," I said, forcing myself to rise, pulling on my clothes, leaving the nurse behind in the dark. The truth was out, though I pretended otherwise.

There were lighter moments too, tinged with the mischief of youth. Helen, one of the girls working that summer, had a

wicked habit: she would lean over the dumb waiter shaft to the kitchen below, shouting down to the person below. When I looked up, she'd lift her shirt and flash her breasts, a quick grin before ducking away. Just a bit of fun, but enough to keep the hunger alive.

Guests brought their own dramas. I remember one couple arriving with a teenage daughter. My friend David "Legs" Nicklin, as one of our gay male guests had named him. A handsome lad who turned heads, knocked on her door one night and asked if she'd like a short affair.

The following day, to my amazement, Legs had told me she said yes. He was glowing, boasting about two hours in her bed.

The Manor was like that, a revolving stage of desires, confessions, and fleeting entanglements.

Through it all, Liz grew weary. She wanted stability, commitment, the kind of love I never seemed able to hold steady. She took Rachel and went to an uncle in America, leaving me to my games and my ghosts. The hotel, once a promise of family life, became just another backdrop for my searching.

Looking back, I see Crackington Manor as a crossroads. It could have been the place I built a home, a marriage, a family life. Instead, it became another stop along the way, another reminder that no matter how many bodies I reached for, what I wanted was something deeper, steadier, harder to find.

The Manor taught me that desire without love is a hollow victory. And though it would take years, and many more mistakes, to truly understand it, the lessons of Crackington

stayed with me, haunting and shaping the man I was becoming.

Chapter Six – Temptations, Failures, and Fatherhood

After Crackington came consequence. Fatherhood, responsibility, and the slow dawning that running from one woman to another wouldn't fill the emptiness I carried.

After Liz left with Rachel, the Manor became less a family home and more a stage for temptation. By then I was twenty-two, already divorced from the dream of marriage I thought would give me roots. My hunger for intimacy grew sharper, more reckless, and I found myself tumbling from one encounter to the next, chasing the thrill of being wanted, but rarely finding satisfaction.

There were nurses, barmaids, summer girls passing through the hotel. Each one offered a flicker of warmth, but each left me colder.

Then came Brighton, a tall, striking woman I met while tending the bar at the Manor. We fell into bed quickly leaving her friend Mandy to find her own man.

The sex was endless, urgent, as if we were determined to consume each other before the night ran out. I later drove her home to Brighton in my father's Volvo P1800S, after some time she returned and moved into my flat.

Things were fine for a while but lust soured into control. She wanted to change me, mould me, and I bristled. One morning I told her to pack her bags. I drove her back to Brighton, left her suitcase on the pavement, and drove away without a backward

glance. Years later, I spotted her in Gibraltar, as if the past had followed me across seas.

It was with Lin, a nurse, that something steadier took root. We collided at Jerry's party, ended up on my water bed, the waves of it exaggerating every movement. It wasn't ideal, but it was the start of something deeper.

With Lin came Olivier, my son, my second chance at fatherhood.

We married at Bude register office, and for a time I thought I had found the permanence I had always wanted. Yet even then, with family forming around me, restlessness gnawed. The ache that had driven me from Issi still stirred inside, whispering of escape.

During the winters, when the hotel closed, I looked for projects to occupy me. One year I poured myself into building a yacht on a friend's farm. Welding in the cold of a steel shed, I believed that if I could build something strong, perhaps I might become strong too. The yacht was a symbol, of freedom, of escape, of the boy inside me who still dreamed of running.

Those years were littered with failures. Times I sought sex when what I needed was love. Times I confused the two and left someone hurt. Times I left myself hurt. I was young, yes, but old enough to know better, old enough to see that the path I was on wasn't leading me to the home I dreamed of as a boy.

Looking back, I see those years as the wilderness between boyhood and manhood. I wanted family, but didn't know how to hold it. I wanted love, but settled for desire. I built boats, chased women, sought out thrills, but the hollow inside remained. It was a pattern that would follow me through

marriages, affairs, and voyages across borders. Always searching, always hungry, never quite arriving.

Chapter Seven – The Steel Yacht

When the walls of love and work began to close in, I looked outward, to the sea. I thought if I could build something strong enough to survive the storms, perhaps I might too.

On Raymond's farm, in a cold steel shed, I began to build my boat. A 38-foot Roberts steel yacht, piece by piece, welded with my own hands. I braced the hull against the barn frame, sparks flying, iron hissing, believing that if I could weld steel into permanence, maybe I could weld strength into myself too.

It was slow, dirty work, measuring plates, cutting them, welding, sweat stinging my eyes. But it gave me purpose. By the time she was finished, she was more than a boat. She was ambition made solid, an escape from the failures that seemed to follow me on land.

We launched her at Plymouth. I remember the thrill as she was lowered into the water, the pride of knowing she floated by my own making. Setting out across the Bay of Biscay, I felt untouchable, until the mast went down. A sudden storm, steel shuddering, sails whipped to rags.

We floated around in the Bay of Biscay for about 10 days until the storm abated to enable us to lift the cover to the engine room and charge the battery and get it started.

I was with Charlie the son of my farmer friend. We started motoring East since if we went East we were sure to hit land. We

saw a ferry come out from between the cliffs so we went in where she came out.

We limped into Quiberon harbour, with the battered mast clattering up the deck.

There, we found a replacement, patched her up, and carried on. Southward she carried us, across sunlit seas, into the Strait, and finally to Gibraltar. It felt like triumph — as though I had forged my freedom with iron and fire, and proved it seaworthy.

But the sea is a trickster. On the return voyage, in calm waters, we hit something just below the surface, probably a container which had been lost overboard. Water started pouring in and we were unable to pump fast enough to keep us afloat so we abandon ship. We were picked up by Swedish coaster and deposited in Cadiz Harbour where the port captain gave me a real grilling thinking we must be drug smugglers or something.

Watching her sink was like watching a piece of myself disappear into the depths, months of sweat, dreams, and pride swallowed in minutes.

When it was over, I was left with nothing but the memory of a boat I had built with my own hands, and the silence of the sea that had swallowed her.

Looking back, she was more than steel and rivets. She was a symbol — of my hunger for freedom, my belief that I could build permanence, my refusal to accept stillness. But permanence cannot be welded, and freedom cannot be forged from iron. Like so much in my life, she too was lost to the waves.

Yet even as I mourned her, the sea still called to me. I could not

leave the water behind. Before long I found myself on another deck, this time not one I had built, but one I would make into a floating playground, a stage for freedom, folly, and desire.

Chapter Eight – The Floating Playground

Freedom at last, or so I thought. But even surrounded by ocean, I discovered that the real storms were never outside the hull, but within me.

Losing the steel yacht should have ended my sailing days, but it only sharpened the hunger. I couldn't walk away from the sea. Before long I was looking for another yacht and in a yachting magazine I discovered the Jeanneau Sunshine 38, sleek, ready-made, and faster than anything I could have built.

I did my searching and discovered one at a French marina and it so happened that the exchange rate the pound to Franc was advantageous and it effectively saved me over two thousand pounds against buying one in the UK.

She wasn't born of my hands like the Roberts, but she became something else entirely: a floating playground.

We loaded the new yacht with everything you'd expect for a life at sea: bedding and pillows, cooking utensils, ropes and spares, and the endless assortment of small essentials you only realise you've forgotten once you're out on the water. Among our cargo, though, was something more unusual, a small armoury.

From Bent Miller's gun shop in Tavistock, I'd bought a stainless-steel Ruger .357 Magnum, a Beretta 9mm, and a Lee-Enfield .303 rifle, ex-army issue. The ammunition still bore the date 1942, stamped into the brass. I remember turning one over in my hand and thinking how strange it was, wartime bullets still sitting on dusty shelves decades later, destined not for battle but for a man and his boat.

There was no need for a firearms certificate, because the customs officer came aboard to deliver the guns himself. He locked them away in the yacht's gun locker, sealing it until we were three miles offshore, safely outside UK territorial waters. On the paperwork I listed their destination as Belém, Brazil, a convenient fiction, and a hint of the adventure ahead.

Once at sea, we took them out for test firings. We'd toss a floating target overboard, a bit of driftwood or an old tin, then circle round and take turns trying to hit it. The crack of the guns echoed across the water, the smell of cordite sharp in the salt air. It wasn't just play. Out there, far from land, you became aware of the stories, yachts boarded, crews robbed, sometimes worse. There were always people who wanted what others had.

So, we prepared. The guns weren't about bravado or violence; they were reassurance, a way of saying that if trouble came over the horizon, we wouldn't be easy prey.

Looking back now, it seems strange how easily I accepted the idea of sailing armed, as if freedom always came with a shadow of fear. Yet in those days it felt perfectly natural. The open sea was beautiful, but it could turn in an instant. Being prepared wasn't paranoia; it was survival.

Again, we set sail. In Gibraltar we met a couple, Malc and his girlfriend, a wild young woman he called Crystal Tips, for the way her hair bounced around her shoulders. They were looking after somebody else's boat.

We got on well with them so we asked them to join us and they were only too pleased to leave their present post. With them, the boat stopped being just a vessel and became a stage. Laughter, music, and desire filled her cabins as much as the salt wind filled her sails.

In St. Tropez, we anchored off a nudist beach. By day, we stripped bare with the rest, letting the sun bronze our skin and the sea dry on our backs.

One afternoon, four of us wandered inland without clothes, giggling at our own daring, until we stumbled across a group of fully dressed walkers. It was a strange jolt, like Adam and Eve eating the apple and suddenly realising their shame. We laughed harder, but beneath it was the thrill of being far from the ordinary world.

There was an evening that stands out in my memory for all the wrong reasons.

We were eating out at a small seaside restaurant when Crystal Tips excused herself, saying she felt unwell.

I followed, concerned and found her standing in the sea, staring towards the horizon. I went into the water and put a hand on her shoulder and asked if she was all right. She didn't answer but pushed her shorts down, I thought she was having a pee but she put her arms behind her and with her fingers biting into my flesh pulled me tight against her, what happened next was

confused, clumsy, and wordless.

Looking back, I realise how little either of us understood about what we wanted or how to say it. There was no tenderness in it, no real connection, just two people adrift, acting out something neither could explain.

We walked back to the restaurant without a word. Even now, I remember the silence more than anything else, the sense that something had passed between us that couldn't be undone.

Life aboard soon turned into a carousel of games. We wrote names on slips of paper, who you had to kiss, and paired them with scraps dictating where.

Lips to breast, cheek to thigh, boy on boy, girl on girl. The only rule was no "holes." If one of us men spilled over into climax, you were disqualified, which only made the games funnier, sillier, and more charged. It was juvenile, yes, but it was freedom, lust dressed up as play.

With Crystal Tips eager for mischief and another woman, Lin, keen to join in, the boat became a theatre of flesh. Joanne, a friend of Malc joined us for a few days, and for a time I felt like a king at sea, measuring myself in orgasms, as though the count proved something about who I was. One day I managed eight in a row, each of the women having their share, as if the number itself could fill the hollow inside me.

There were nights of laughter, mornings of hangovers, afternoons of sun-dazed skin sticky with salt and sweat. It was a season of indulgence, of living out the fantasies of freedom and desire. For a while, I believed the sea had given me what land had denied, a place without rules, without judgement, without

consequence.

But freedom is never without cost. When the sails were down and the laughter faded, I felt the emptiness again. Each port brought new faces, new temptations, and yet nothing lasted. Even in the whirl of naked games and easy bodies, loneliness followed me like a shadow across the deck.

While we were in St. Tropez, we did have a rule that, in the evening, while sat at the dinner table, you had to be dressed. Dressing for dinner meant you wore knickers or underpants.

Over wine and snacks, charts spread across the saloon table, the crew and I gathered to discuss where we would go to next.

After some debate, we made a group decision: we'd sail east, all the way to Kefalonia in Greece. It felt like a bold leap, a real voyage, the kind that separates dreamers from sailors.

There was, however, one complication: our insurance didn't cover Italy. That meant no landfall along the Italian coast, no romantic stopovers in Sardinia or Sicily. We would have to sail straight through, keeping to international waters and aiming for the Strait of Messina, the narrow passage between mainland Italy and Sicily.

We approached it at night, the sea dark and heavy beneath us. Then, out of the blackness, came one of nature's great performances, Stromboli, alive and erupting. From the deck we had a ringside seat: fountains of molten rock glowing red against the night sky, smoke rising like a ghostly veil. The sea around us reflected the firelight, turning each wave into molten gold. It was both terrifying and beautiful, a reminder of how small we really were.

Sometime after midnight, a military vessel appeared off our port side, a grey silhouette sliding silently across the dark. Suddenly, a powerful searchlight flared to life, flooding our yacht in brilliant white. For a few seconds we were frozen in the beam like actors caught mid-scene. Then, as quickly as it came, the light shifted away. The vessel altered course and motored off into the night, leaving us blinking in the darkness, the sound of the sea returning like a sigh of relief.

We laughed about it afterward, but beneath the laughter was a shared understanding: the sea can turn from freedom to vulnerability in an instant. That night, under the glow of a living volcano and the gaze of an unseen navy, I felt both the wonder and the danger of the world we were crossing.

While we were on the island of Kefalonia, we met someone I knew from back in Launceston, a young man that used to be a butcher. He was a good sort, steady, practical, and he agreed to join our small crew for the return voyage.

Not long after, a problem cropped up back in the UK that needed my attention, so I had to leave the yacht and fly home. The others were to sail back to Port Leucate in France, with Jim in charge. He was a seasoned sailor, experienced and confident, and I trusted him completely.

The plan seemed simple enough. But as with so many of my ventures, things didn't go to plan.

Jim decided to take the route through the Strait of Bonifacio, the narrow and often treacherous passage between Corsica and Sardinia. He wanted to stop in Bonifacio harbour for supplies.

With the quarantine flag flying, the yellow "Q" flag, signalling his

request for pratique, he entered the port. The visitor berths were full, so he went further in and moored directly against the quay.

That small decision set off a chain of trouble. French customs officers spotted the British yacht moored out of place and decided to investigate.

They boarded, searched, and found what they weren't expecting: our small cache of firearms, safely locked away, the Ruger, the Beretta, and the old Lee Enfield rifle but they said that he should have been at the visitors berth and declair the guns.

To them, it looked like smuggling. To us, it was just bad luck.

Jim was marched off to the police station and locked up. The guns were seized immediately.

I was back in the UK when I received the news. My stomach dropped. I got on the phone to the French chargé d'affaires, explaining as best I could what had happened, that the weapons were legally owned, that they were being transported under license. He sighed and said, "Monsieur, this is Corsica. They have their own way of doing things."

Later that day, he rang me back. His message was brief but clear: he had been in touch with the customs office in Bonifacio. If I paid two thousand pounds, Jim would be released, but the guns would not be returned.

I wired the money without hesitation. A few days later, Jim was free and the yacht was heading again towards Port Leucate, lighter by three firearms and two thousand pounds, but at least intact.

It was a hard lesson, one that stayed with me. The sea has its own laws, but every port has its own politics. Freedom, I was learning, always comes with a price.

Looking back, the Jeanneau was less a yacht and more a mirror. She carried me into pleasure, yes, but also into truth: that I could sail seas, share beds, and chase thrills without ever touching the thing I was really after. She was my playground, my stage, my escape, but not my home.

Chapter Nine – Cath

Then came Cath, wild, sharp, irresistible, a woman who reminded me that passion can be both salvation and destruction, often in the same breath.

Among all the women who passed through my life, Cath was different. I met her during the yacht years, when the Jeanneau Sunshine was less a boat and more a carnival. Among the laughter, nudity, and games, she stood out, fiery, alive, and not willing to be swept along like the others.

At first she wanted nothing to do with me. She saw the chaos for what it was and kept her distance. I chased, she resisted.

I thought that was the end of it. But then, one night, she surprised me. She came and stood in front of me, stripped naked and climbed onto my lap, and everything changed. Will I ever understand women!

For a while we lived together in her apartment, a kind of improvised half-marriage. There were moments of tenderness, but also arguments, tension, and the nagging feeling that I was

still carrying the restlessness of the sea inside me.

Cath was also trying to find her footing in England. She landed a job with a company in Marlow, Buckinghamshire, but she had no National Insurance number.

One day a wages inspector turned up, asking questions. Of course Cath couldn't produce the number, and the whole job looked in jeopardy. Thinking fast, she told the inspector that when she turned sixteen she had never received it.

He frowned, said he would check, and a week later, miraculously, Cath had her National Insurance Number issued. It was a little trick that worked then, though I doubt it would pass muster these days.

We laughed about it afterwards, but at the time it meant everything: Cath could keep her job, her independence, and her place here.

Eventually, though, she had enough of my chaos. She found a steadier man, a local vet, and with him she went off to Australia.

I let her go, convinced she was gone from my story for good. Another failed attempt, another woman lost to the tide.

But Cath wasn't finished with me, nor I with her. Years later, after her marriage ended in divorce, our paths crossed again. By then, we were both older, changed by what life had thrown at us.

This time, when we came together, it wasn't just passion or convenience, it was a decision. We married, and for the first time in a long while, I felt as though my searching had led me somewhere solid.

Cath saw me clearly. She wasn't fooled by charm, and she wasn't frightened by the wreckage I carried. She accepted both my flaws and my fire. Being with her was different: steadier, warmer, less about trophies or thrills, more about living side by side.

It didn't last forever, few things in my life did. But Cath left a mark that others hadn't. She was proof that even amid chaos, even after all the detours, love could circle back. She reminded me that sometimes timing is everything: what fails in youth may find its chance later, when both hearts are ready.

Chapter Ten – The Marriages

Cath was not the last, nor the first, to try to build a home with me. The marriages that followed were proof that love can be sincere even when it fails, and that failure doesn't always mean regret.

If fatherhood had forced me to grow up, marriage kept pulling me back into the same cycle: the hope of permanence, followed by the disappointment of restlessness.

The first came with the dancer. We were young, reckless, swept along by music, nightclubs, and the conviction that passion alone could carry us. It didn't. What we shared gave me my first glimpse of family life, and my first deep fracture when it ended.

Later there was the American, fiery and alive. With her I felt something different, more grown-up, more serious. We married, but her fire eventually burned elsewhere, and I was left carrying the ache of another failure.

Then came the chef's companion, someone practical, tied to the

routines of kitchens and long hours. For a while we were partners in more than just romance. She offered steadiness, but I strayed, chasing excitement, and the marriage couldn't hold.

After her was the hotel beauty, met through late nights in a world of drink, chatter, and chance encounters. What began in spark and laughter quickly dissolved into the ordinary, and neither of us had the will to fight for more.

Finally, there was the nurse, who stood by me when life was at its most unsettled. With her I shared a home and glimpsed the family life I always claimed to want. For a while I believed this time would be different. But restlessness gnawed again, and what could have been lasting slipped away.

Looking back, each of these marriages and near-marriages followed the same pattern. I mistook attraction for love, novelty for permanence, sex for intimacy. I wanted the warmth of being seen, but the moment things steadied, I longed for escape. Each time, I believed I had found the answer. Each time, my hunger for something just out of reach pulled me away.

Chapter Eleven – My Chinese Lover

For years my relationships had burned fast and fizzled quickly, but with my Chinese lover, it was different. She came into my life with a steadiness I hadn't known before, sharp, practical, and worldly. What began as companionship grew into something more durable than any of the marriages that had come before.

We lasted fourteen years. Fourteen years of routines, of shared meals, of laughter over small things. With her, I learned what it

meant to have someone by your side through the dull stretches as well as the bright ones. She kept me grounded in ways I hadn't thought possible. For a time, I believed I had cracked the code at last, that the search was over, that perhaps I had found the permanence I'd always chased but never held.

Those years weren't dramatic. They weren't wild or reckless like the voyages, or fiery like my earlier affairs. Instead, they were measured, almost domestic. We cooked together, planned together, even dreamed together. And though a restless part of me still stirred, I learned to quiet it in her company.

But love is never lived in a vacuum. When my son Olivier came to live with us, the balance shifted. She couldn't accept him, couldn't share the space, couldn't find a way to fold him into the life we had built. For her, it was a matter of territory, of boundaries. For me, it was blood, responsibility, and a love that ran deeper than any partnership.

In the end, there was no real choice. I chose my son.

The collapse was swift. Fourteen years unraveled in a matter of weeks, like a rug pulled out from under me. One moment we were a couple with history, the next we were strangers parting ways. She left, and I was back to emptiness, back to staring at the hollow inside myself that no partner had yet managed to fill.

I still think of those years as a kind of lesson. My Chinese lover showed me that I was capable of commitment, that I could hold a relationship steady when the storms weren't too strong. But she also reminded me how fragile love can be when tested, how quickly it can turn when demands collide.

When she left, I carried another scar, not the jagged wound of

betrayal, but the dull ache of a long life shared and then suddenly gone. Fourteen years taught me much about companionship, but also about loss. And once again, I found myself standing at the edge of love, looking into the emptiness, still searching.

Chapter Twelve – Alma and Letecia

And then, when I least expected it, love found me again, not the restless kind of my youth, but the steady, grounded love that grows quietly until you realise it's been home all along.

After that, loneliness returned in full force. I was single again, but older now, carrying the weight of failures.

I took the lease on a pub and restaurant near St Albans. Hospitality had always been part of my life, and I'd done my training at The National Liberal Club in Whitehall, London under Ron, the manager, I say *under* with care, because Ron was gay and liked young boys, but my boarding school education had already taught me how to handle "Ron-type" situations.

Desire still burned, though more desperate now. I made mistakes, I went to prostitutes, both Chinese and Spanish. They were unsatisfying, hollow encounters that left me ashamed. I had sought sex as comfort, but found only emptiness. It was the lowest ebb of my searching.

The women who came into the pub weren't interested in me, so I turned online. I joined two or three dating sites and conversed

with several women, but on Filipino Cupid one stood out above all the rest. Her name was Alma, and she was like me, free, open, and possibly a little bit naughty.

On my dating profile, I wrote that I was fifty-eight. In truth, it was 2017, and I was seventy.

Yes, I know, a touch dishonest. But in that sort of marketplace, you do what you must to give yourself a fighting chance.

Besides, I didn't *look* seventy. I was still running a pub, hauling barrels, keeping fit, full of energy. And when she told me she was thirty-seven, I couldn't help thinking, *well then, let's see what happens.*

It didn't take long for me to decide to check out this "vision of loveliness." She lived on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines, so I took a flight to Davao.

She met me at the airport, she was beautiful and appeared not as a fling, not as a quick distraction, but as a steady presence. A Filipina with kindness in her eyes and resilience in her step. What began as a spark grew slowly, carefully, until one day I realised I wasn't restless anymore.

For the first time in decades, I wasn't looking over her shoulder for someone else, wasn't thinking of escape or novelty. Alma gave me what I had been chasing all my life, not just desire, not just comfort, but love.

I had been with Alma for more than five years, flying backwards and forwards, when our daughter Letecia was born.

She arrived during the Covid-19 pandemic, when lockdowns stranded me in the Philippines for two and a half years.

It was the longest I had ever stayed in one place with one person. Letecia bound us together in ways no game, no fling, no marriage ever had.

With Alma and Letecia, I found what I had been chasing all my life. Not just desire, not just companionship, not even just family, but love. Love that stayed, love that endured, love that didn't make me restless or leave me hollow.

For decades I had searched: in school dormitories, in nightclubs, in beds and on boats, in marriages and affairs, across borders and oceans. Always searching, always hungry, never arriving. But here, in the Philippines, with Alma by my side and Letecia on my lap, the search was over.

Suddenly, my restless searching had a destination. I was home.

Of course, nothing in my life ever arrived without complication. Alma was married, to a Filipino.

They had long since drifted apart, their marriage only existing in name, but the Philippines is a country without divorce. For Alma, freedom meant pursuing the tortuous process of annulment.

We talked about it often, sometimes late into the night, sometimes in whispers when it all felt too heavy. "If the annulment goes through," she'd say, "we can make everything official. We can be together properly, like we should be."

I nodded, hopeful, but deep down I knew the process was uncertain. Annulments in the Philippines are complicated, expensive, and mostly denied.

When her application was rejected due to lack of evidence, such as Lack of parental consent, Fraud, Force, Impotence, Sexually

Transmissible Diseases, Psychological Incapacity.

Alma's face fell into a sadness I can still picture. She had hoped, just as I had, that a door might finally open for us. Instead, it slammed shut.

But here's the thing: in that moment of disappointment, we grew closer. Many of my past relationships would have ended there, buckled under the weight of obstacles. With Alma, I felt no urge to run. The paperwork didn't matter to me, not really. What mattered was the woman sitting beside me, the way her hand found mine even in disappointment.

We carried on as we were, unofficial but inseparable. Alma became not just a partner but a constant, her loyalty and care steadying me in ways I had never known. For the first time, I wasn't chasing another woman while holding one. I wasn't restless. I was content.

Five Years Together

Time passed, and five years went by with Alma as my partner. They weren't dramatic years, not like the stormy hotel days or the yacht voyages. Instead, they were steady, almost quiet—and that in itself was extraordinary for me.

We built routines. Morning coffees shared in the gentle heat of the Philippines. Walks to the market, where she knew everyone and everyone knew her. Nights where we sat side by side, not needing to talk, just comfortable in each other's presence.

Looking back, those years taught me more about love than all the fiery affairs and marriages that came before. Love wasn't about drama or passion that burned too bright. Love was about

the person who stayed, the one who didn't leave when the paperwork failed, the one whose smile you never tired of.

It was during those years that I began to believe, truly, that Alma was different. That maybe, after decades of searching, I had stumbled into the very thing I'd been yearning for all along.

Then the world stopped.

When COVID-19 swept across the globe, I found myself stranded in the Philippines. What was meant to be a visit stretched into two and a half years. Flights were cancelled, borders sealed, rules changed almost weekly.

At first, I thought it would only last a few months. Then, as the weeks turned into seasons, reality sank in: I wasn't going anywhere.

Life in the Philippines was never without its surprises, but nothing prepared us for the fury of Typhoon *Rai*, locally called *Odette*. It struck halfway through December 2021, and as fate would have it, our home on Bohol stood squarely in its path.

When the winds came, they screamed like living things, tearing through the palms, snapping trees as though they were twigs. By morning, the world outside our window was unrecognisable. Roofs were gone, power lines twisted on the ground, and the air was thick with salt and splintered bamboo.

We had no electricity, no internet, and without power, no water from the well. Most petrol stations around us stood silent, their pumps dead without generators. For days, life shrank to its simplest terms, light by candle, food cooked over charcoal, the rhythm of survival measured by sunrise and dusk.

As soon as we could, we packed some things and drove west to Anda, about a hundred kilometres away. We managed to rent a basic house there, modest, but it had power and running water, and most importantly, a sense of safety.

We stayed in Anda for over a year, and it was there, in that fragile moment between loss and rebuilding, that Letecia was born. In the midst of the wreckage, new life arrived, tiny, perfect, unafraid of the world that had just shown us its wildest face.

When we finally returned to our home on Bohol, the land bore its scars, uprooted trees, broken walls, fragments of lives still being pieced back together. But there was peace in it, too, the quiet rhythm of survival and the soft hum of recovery.

In the stillness that followed, I often thought about how fragile everything truly is, houses, plans, even certainty itself. One night of wind and rain can undo years of comfort. And yet, something inside me felt steadier than before.

I had weathered storms of many kinds, emotional, financial, romantic, but this one stripped life down to its core. What mattered most wasn't what we'd lost, but what had endured: Alma's calm strength, the laughter of neighbours rebuilding together, and the small, fierce cry of our daughter.

Typhoon Rai tore through our world, but it also revealed the quiet truth of love, not the love found in passion or pursuit, but the kind rooted in endurance, in shared survival, in holding one another when the wind howls and the lights go out.

Back in the UK, my pub and restaurant were suffering. With restrictions and lockdowns, the business collapsed.

By 2022, it was bankrupt, gone. The loss was devastating, not just financially, my savings had gone, but emotionally.

That pub had been my livelihood, my home, my connection to the community. Losing it felt like another chapter closing, another failure piling onto the rest. On top of that the owner refused to renew the lease.

There was a little less than a year to run. So I did a deal and walked away with no home to go to.

But in the Philippines, in the heart of uncertainty, something unexpected bloomed. Alma and I were together every day, navigating the lockdowns, the curfews, the endless hand-washing and mask-wearing. Where many couples might have buckled under the pressure, we grew stronger. There was no escape, no distractions, no voyages to run to. Just us, side by side.

And then, in the middle of that chaos, came the biggest surprise of my life: Alma was pregnant.

Letecia's Birth

I was seventy-five years old when Alma told me she was expecting. At first, I thought it impossible, some trick of age or fate. But no, it was real. Against every odd, we were going to have a child together.

When Letecia was born in 2022, something shifted in me forever. I had been a father before, Rachel in 1971, Olivier in 1991, but this was different. This was later, quieter, deeper. I wasn't a young man chasing life anymore. I was an old man, holding a new life, humbled by the sheer luck of it.

They placed her in my arms, tiny and perfect, and I felt tears stinging my eyes. Here she was, my daughter, born not in the shadow of searching but in the light of finding.

Alma lay exhausted but smiling, her hand resting on my arm. In that moment, I realized my search was over. I had found what I had been looking for my entire life: family, love, belonging.

I called her Letecia, though soon I gave her a nickname: *Munchi*, after the Munchkins in the Wizard of Oz. She became the centre of my world, the reason my heart beat a little stronger each morning.

A New Beginning

Now, as I sit and write these words, Letecia is nearly three years old. She runs through the house with boundless energy, her laughter filling every corner. She climbs onto my lap and calls me Daddy, her small hands clutching at my shirt as if I were the most solid thing in her universe.

At seventy-eight, I should have been slowing down, retreating into the quiet of retirement. Instead, I am beginning again, nappies, bedtime stories, the endless wonder of watching a child discover the world. Some days it is exhausting; most days it is a miracle.

There are moments, of course, when the weight of age presses down. I know my time is limited. I know I may not see her grown, may not walk her down the aisle, may not hold her children. That knowledge cuts deep. But instead of despair, I find gratitude. Because even if my years are shorter now, they are richer than they have ever been.

With Alma by my side and Letecia in my arms, I no longer feel restless. The hunger that drove me for decades has quieted. My searching has ended.

What I have now is enough. More than enough. It is everything.

Chapter 13: Legacy and the Weight of Time

With Alma beside me and Letecia in my arms, I began to measure life differently. Not in years or adventures, but in moments of presence, the real currency of time.

There comes a point in a man's life when the mirror tells him truths he doesn't want to hear.

My face, once fresh with the swagger of youth, is now lined with maps of years lived hard and searching. My hair, what's left of it, has thinned and silvered. My hands, the same hands that once built yachts, poured pints behind a bar, stroked the skin of countless lovers, now carry a tremor when I least expect it.

I have never been afraid of age. To me, it was always an abstract thing that happened to other people. But with Letecia in my arms, with Alma's head resting against my shoulder, I feel it differently.

Age is no longer abstract, it is a clock ticking above me, loud in the quiet of night.

It is the realization that while Letecia runs forward into her life, I am moving the other way. For every year she grows taller, stronger, more curious, I grow older, slower, frailer. Our paths

cross in this moment, but one day hers will continue on without me.

That thought haunts me, but it also focuses me. Legacy has become more than a word, it has become my mission.

When I was young, I thought legacy was about accomplishments: the nursing homes I built with my brother-in-law, the pub and restaurant I ran, the yacht I welded together from steel. I thought legacy was about wealth, property, the visible proofs of a life lived with ambition.

But those things slip away. The nursing homes were sold to a corporation. The pub went under in the COVID storm. The yacht lies at the bottom of the sea.

What remains are people.

Rachel, my first daughter, now a woman with her own life across the ocean in America. Olivier, my son, carrying with him the years of France and the bond of fatherhood tested and stretched. And now Letecia, small and laughing, the newest link in a long, complicated chain.

They are my legacy. Not the mistakes, not the bankruptcies or the failed marriages, but the children who carry my name, my stories, my blood. Even in the wreckage of my searching, I have left something behind that matters.

And Alma. She is part of that legacy too. Not just as the mother of Letecia, but as the one who stayed when others didn't, the one who anchored me when I might have drifted into loneliness forever.

It's the small things that strike me most now.

The way Letecia's tiny hand curls around my finger. The way Alma hums when she cooks, some old tune from her childhood in the Philippines. The way our evenings settle into a rhythm, dinner, washing up, Alma tucking Letecia into bed, me sitting in the quiet afterwards with a glass of water instead of rum, reflecting on how different life feels now.

I used to live for grand gestures, big adventures, the next thrill. Now I live for mornings when Letecia climbs onto my lap and demands a story. For afternoons when Alma and I sit together, not needing to speak. For the comfort of routine, the thing I once thought was suffocating but now find precious.

Every bedtime story I tell, every walk we take to the market, every laugh around the dinner table, it all feels like a gift, a piece of time I never thought I'd have at this stage of life.

But there is a shadow beneath the joy, one I cannot ignore. It is the fear of absence.

What happens when I am no longer here? When Letecia is still a child and her father is only a memory? I think of my own father, distant and preoccupied, and how little of him I truly knew. I don't want that for her. I want her to know me, not just in stories Alma will tell, but in the words I leave behind.

Perhaps that is why I write now, pouring my life onto these pages. So that when the time comes, Letecia can open this book and hear my voice, see the boy I was, the man I became, the mistakes I made, and the love that carried me through.

I want her to know the truth, that I spent a lifetime searching for love, fumbling, failing, trying again, until finally, in her and her mother, I found it.

Sometimes Alma and I talk about the future, about what will happen if I go before her.

"You must live a long time," she tells me, half-teasing, half-serious. "Letecia needs her Daddy."

"I'll try," I say, though both of us know it's not in my hands.

Other times, she is quiet, thoughtful. "If something happens," she says, "I will tell her everything. How much you loved her. How much you loved us both."

Those words bring me comfort, but also a pang. Because the truth is, I want to be there myself. I want to see Letecia grow, to walk her to school, to watch her blossom into the woman she will become. I want to be there when she needs advice, when she falls in love, when she faces the inevitable heartbreaks of life.

I can't guarantee any of that. But I can be here now. I can love her fiercely, daily, so that even if I am gone tomorrow, she will carry that love in her bones.

I never expected this, not at seventy-eight. After five marriages, after yachts and nightclubs and all the chaos, I thought my story was one of restlessness without resolution. I thought I'd go to my grave still searching.

But life, in its strange mercy, gave me Alma. And through Alma, it gave me Letecia.

Every morning I wake up beside them feels like borrowed time, a gift I didn't earn but will never stop treasuring. I may not have wealth to leave behind, or businesses, or properties. But I can leave behind love. And perhaps that is the greatest legacy of all.

When I think of the boy standing on Windsor Road in 1953, staring up at Barbara Maylott, waving half-heartedly at the Queen, I see a boy aching for love. That boy grew into a man who searched in every corner, schools, hotels, marriages, yachts, bars, always restless, always hungry.

And now, at the edge of my years, I see him finally at peace. Not because he conquered the world, but because he found, at last, the simple, extraordinary gift of family.

My search is over. My love is here.

Chapter 14: The Intimacy of Family Life

If legacy is what we leave behind, intimacy is what we live within. The laughter of my daughter, the calm of Alma's voice, these are the sounds that now define my days.

It's the little noises that shape my days now. The patter of Letecia's feet on the tiled floor as she runs from room to room. The clatter of pans as Alma prepares lunch, humming some half-remembered tune from her childhood. The squeal of laughter when Munchi, as I call her, hides behind a curtain and thinks I cannot see her.

My life was once filled with louder sounds: the roar of a nightclub, the crash of waves against a yacht, the heated arguments of broken marriages. Those sounds defined decades of restlessness. Now, it is these smaller sounds that matter most. They are not dramatic, not theatrical, but they are constant. They are home.

Food has never been important to me, running pubs and restaurants made sure of that. But never have meals felt so rich as they do now.

Alma is a marvel in the kitchen. She can take the simplest ingredients, a fish fresh from the market, a handful of vegetables, a splash of vinegar, and create something that carries both comfort and history. "This is what my mother made," she'll say, handing me a steaming bowl.

We eat together as a family, Letecia perched between us. She demands bites from both plates, somehow convinced that her food tastes better if stolen from ours. Alma laughs and lets her; I protest half-heartedly but give in every time.

In those meals, I feel something I never did in the dining rooms of hotels or the smoky back rooms of clubs. I feel togetherness. The warmth of shared food, shared laughter, shared silence.

Evenings belong to Letecia.

She insists on a story each night, though often she interrupts halfway through to ask questions that have nothing to do with the tale. "Why do the stars shine?" "Where does the moon go in the morning?" Sometimes, I put the book aside and answer as best I can, marvelling at how her young mind reaches beyond the page.

Other times, I persist, telling her of knights and dragons, of forests and hidden treasures. Alma listens too, often pretending to be busy with chores but really lingering in the doorway, smiling.

When Letecia finally drifts to sleep, her small body curled

against her blanket, I sit a while longer just watching her breathe. It is a simple act, yet it fills me with a peace I never thought possible.

After Letecia sleeps, Alma and I have our quiet time. We sit together, sometimes with tea, sometimes with nothing but silence. Our conversations are not about grand plans or dramatic confessions. They are about the small details of the day: the neighbor who visited, the price of rice in the market, the funny thing Letecia said that morning.

And yet, in those ordinary conversations, I feel the extraordinary. For the first time in my life, I am not restless in companionship. Alma's presence soothes me. She doesn't demand I be someone I'm not. She doesn't measure my worth in accomplishments or wealth. She simply loves me as I am, an old man with a past full of failures, and a present full of gratitude.

It is not lost on me how unusual my situation is. Most men my age are grandfathers, not fathers of toddlers. They sit in armchairs with pipes or shuffle slowly through gardens, their children long grown. I, at nearly eighty, chase a laughing girl through the house, my knees aching but my heart light.

Sometimes, Alma teases me. "You're like a grandfather and a father rolled into one," she says. I laugh, though I know there's truth in it.

The truth is, I treasure it. I treasure the chance to read bedtime stories, to hold small hands, to answer impossible questions. I treasure the chance to live family life not as an idea but as a daily reality. For all the searching, all the mistakes, all the restlessness, this is what I wanted. And though I have less time

than most fathers, perhaps I have more appreciation.

Chapter 15: Shadows and Storms

Even the calmest harbour knows the taste of storms. Illness, uncertainty, the creeping fear of endings, they visit, uninvited, reminding me that peace must sometimes be fought for.

For a time, life felt almost too steady. The days unfolded with a rhythm so gentle I sometimes wondered if I deserved it.

I had spent so many decades chasing, breaking, mending, searching. Now here I was, waking to Letecia's giggles, Alma's cooking, and the steady beat of family life.

But shadows have a way of creeping in, even under the brightest light.

It began with small things: my body reminding me of my years. A knee that stiffened after chasing Letecia through the garden. A cough that lingered longer than it should. The mirror reflecting not just age but the fragile truth of it. I had always prided myself on resilience, on pushing through. But now, even a simple climb up the steps left me winded.

Alma noticed, of course. "You must take care," she'd say, frowning as she set a bowl of soup in front of me. "You cannot play like a young man anymore."

"I still can," I'd protest, smiling, but we both knew the limits were catching up.

Then came the financial worries. My pension sustained us, but it was never abundant, and I knew the truth: it died with me. What

would Alma and Letecia live on if I were gone?

The pub's collapse in 2022 had left us with nothing from that venture. My savings were spent, my land in France a half-forgotten relic. I did what I could, tightened our belts, thought of ways to stretch the pounds. But at night, lying awake while Alma breathed softly beside me, the thought returned:

Have I secured their future? Or have I left them vulnerable?

It gnawed at me, the way regret always does.

And then there was the distance between my children.

Rachel, my first-born, far away in California, her life almost entirely separate from mine. Olivier, my son in France, carrying his own burdens and his own view of me. And now Letecia, still small, her world entirely wrapped around me.

It struck me sometimes with sharp clarity: how would she come to understand her family? Would she know her siblings? Would they accept her, or see her only as the child of a father they barely knew?

I imagined Letecia, older, asking me questions I might not be here to answer: Why did Rachel live in America? Why hadn't I been there more? Why did her brother live across the sea?

The thought twisted like a knife.

Alma sensed my unease. She always did.

One night, after Letecia had fallen asleep, she sat beside me, her hand covering mine.

"You worry too much," she said gently.

"I worry because I must," I replied. "I want to leave you safe. I want to leave her with something more than just stories."

"You leave her with love," Alma said simply. "That is more than money, more than land. She will know her father loved her."

I wanted to believe her. Some nights I did. Other nights, the fear returned, because I knew too well how absence shapes a child. I had lived it.

The storm, in truth, wasn't outside. It wasn't the finances, or the body aching with age, or the complicated family tree. The storm was within me, the old restless spirit that sometimes still stirred, whispering that I had failed too many times, that even now, with love in my arms, I would leave chaos behind.

But Alma anchored me. Letecia grounded me. Their presence quieted the storm. Even on the nights when I lay awake, staring at the ceiling, the sound of Alma's steady breathing reminded me that I was not alone.

The shadows remain, of course. They always do. But I've learned something in these later years: shadows are only proof that there is light. Without love, without Alma and Letecia, the shadows would consume me. With them, they are softened, manageable, even reminders of how much I have to lose, and therefore, how much I must cherish.

For the first time, storms no longer send me running. I stay. I face them. Because the love I hold now is worth every shadow that lingers.

This chapter is not about collapse, but about testing. About the way age, finances, and distance press upon love. And about the

truth that storms, when faced with the right person beside you, can become simply weather to be endured, not disasters to be fled.

I have faced storms all my life, but this time, I face them with Alma's hand in mine and Letecia's laughter in my ears. And that changes everything.

Chapter 16: Renewal and Healing

But storms pass. And when they do, the air feels cleaner, the light softer. Healing isn't about erasing pain, it's about learning how to breathe through it.

Storms can't be avoided, but they can be weathered. After the shadows of illness scares, financial worries, and my late-night anxieties about legacy, Alma and I made an unspoken decision: we would not live in fear.

"We have today," she said one morning as she set down a bowl of steaming rice and fish. "That is enough."

At first, her words struck me as too simple. My mind, always restless, wanted plans, solutions, guarantees. But over time, I saw the wisdom in her quiet philosophy. Today is all any of us truly have. And if today is filled with laughter, with love, with the sound of Letecia's giggles, then it is more than enough.

So we began to choose joy, daily, deliberately.

Healing came through little traditions, stitched together day by day.

On Sundays, we walked to the market, Letecia perched between

us, chattering about the bright fabrics and the smell of roasted corn. Alma would barter with a smile, returning with a basket full of vegetables, while I carried Letecia on my shoulders, her laughter ringing out like bells.

On Friday nights, we made it a ritual to eat together outside beneath the mango tree. Alma would lay out a simple feast—grilled fish, fresh fruit, rice—and we would watch the sky darken as fireflies began their nightly dance. Letecia called them “fairy lights” and chased them until she collapsed, giggling, in the grass.

Even bedtime became part of our healing rhythm. Where once my mind raced with fears, now I leaned into the ritual of storytelling, of tucking Munchi in and kissing her forehead. These routines, small as they were, stitched me back together.

Renewal also meant facing the distances I had long avoided.

I began to write more often to Rachel in California, sending photos of Letecia, telling her about Alma. Sometimes her replies were brief, polite but distant. Other times, she surprised me with warmth, asking about her little sister, sharing snippets of her own life. It wasn't perfect, but it was a start.

Olivier, too, I tried to bridge with more honesty. Our conversations weren't always easy, years of distance don't vanish overnight, but with Alma's encouragement, I began to speak less like a man making excuses and more like a father who wanted to know his son.

Healing, I learned, wasn't about erasing the past. It was about facing it, acknowledging it, and choosing to build something better from here.

It was Alma's idea to make the garden our sanctuary. "A place to grow things," she said. "A place that will last."

We planted vegetables first, tomatoes, eggplants, chillies. Then flowers, bright bursts of colour that Letecia insisted on watering daily. And, of course, the mango tree stood as our centerpiece, its branches spreading wide, its fruit ripening in the sun.

Working in the garden healed me in ways I didn't expect. My hands, once used for building yachts and pulling pints, now pressed seeds into the soil. Watching them sprout and bloom was like watching my own spirit renew.

And for Letecia, the garden became a playground of discovery. She chased butterflies, dug in the soil, and claimed one corner as her "secret garden," a patch where she planted marigolds and declared them her flowers alone.

Amid the routines and the gardening, Alma and I also rediscovered intimacy, not just in the physical sense, though that too, but in the quiet closeness of partnership.

We learned to talk more openly, to share not just practical concerns but fears and dreams. Alma told me about her childhood, her hopes for Letecia's future. I told her about my past—not all the sordid details, but enough for her to understand the man I had been and the man I was trying to be.

At night, when the house was quiet, we would lie together, our hands entwined, no need for words. That closeness healed something in me I hadn't realized was still broken, the part of me that believed love always faded. With Alma, it deepened.

Healing, of course, isn't only spiritual. One day Alma insisted I

see a doctor about my knees, which had grown increasingly stiff. I resisted at first. "It's just age," I grumbled.

"Maybe," she said, "but we need you strong for Munchi."

So I went, and though the news wasn't dire, it was a reminder: I needed to care for this body, to treasure the years I still had. I began walking more, eating better, resting when I needed to.

Alma kept a careful eye on me, and though sometimes I bristled at being fussed over, I knew it came from love.

Taking care of myself became part of the healing too, because it wasn't just about me anymore. It was about Alma, about Letecia, about being here as long as I could.

Above all, renewal came through gratitude.

Every night, before sleep, I began the habit of naming three things I was thankful for. Sometimes it was simple: a good meal, Letecia's laughter, Alma's touch. Other times it was profound: surviving long enough to see this chapter of life, finding peace after decades of restlessness, knowing that even in my twilight years, I had been given a new beginning.

Gratitude softened the shadows. Gratitude made room for joy. Gratitude reminded me that healing isn't about erasing scars, it's about learning to see them as part of the story.

Each morning under the mango tree, each evening in the quiet of our home, I am reminded: renewal is not found in wild voyages or fleeting affairs. It is found in love that stays, in roots that grow, in the daily decision to be present.

And for the first time in my life, I am not searching. I am here.

Chapter 17: Looking Ahead

Once, I lived by looking back, at mistakes, losses, the could-have-beens. Now, I find myself looking forward, not with ambition but with quiet wonder at what time still allows.

By the time a man reaches his late seventies, most people expect him to speak in the language of endings, wrapping things up, settling accounts, preparing quietly for the inevitable. And yet, here I am, thinking in the language of beginnings.

Each morning when I wake to Letecia climbing onto the bed, declaring, "Daddy, story time!" before the sun has fully risen, I feel as though life has handed me a new notebook with blank pages. Not the yellowed paper of old ledgers, but crisp, white sheets waiting for fresh ink.

For the first time in decades, my story is not about what has passed, but about what is still possible.

Looking ahead, my greatest vision is for Letecia. She is still so small, yet already her curiosity stretches beyond the walls of our home. She asks questions that make me smile, about the stars, about the animals, about why mangoes fall when they are ripe. But beneath her innocence, I see a spark that could grow into something bright and uncontainable.

I hope she inherits Alma's steadiness, her resilience. I hope she inherits my curiosity, my drive to explore, though perhaps tempered by wisdom. I hope she grows in confidence, knowing

she was wanted, loved, cherished from the very first moment. Sometimes, late at night, Alma and I whisper our dreams for her.

"Maybe she'll be a teacher," Alma says. "She loves asking questions."

"Maybe she'll be a doctor," I reply. "She has a gentle touch."

"Or an artist," Alma muses.

"Or," I add, smiling, "maybe she'll be something we've never imagined."

The truth is, I don't care what path she chooses, so long as she walks it with courage and kindness. My only hope is that she remembers her father's love as she steps into her future.

Of course, looking ahead is not just about dreams, it is about responsibility. I know my years are numbered, and so I think constantly of what I can leave for Alma and Letecia.

Financially, I worry. My pension sustains us, but it ends with me. I look at the land I still hold in France, and I wonder if that could one day be part of her inheritance. I think of the manuscripts I am writing now, of the possibility that these stories could, in some small way, provide income for her future.

I cannot leave millions. But perhaps I can leave security, and beyond that, wisdom. Words, after all, outlast money. A book can carry my voice into her adulthood, reminding her of who I was, of what I wanted for her.

Looking ahead also means acknowledging Alma's strength. She has carried more than her share of burdens, navigating her complicated marital status, raising Letecia with grace, standing

beside me through financial collapse and pandemic isolation.

I know that one day, she may need to carry on without me. And though the thought brings a lump to my throat, I also know she is strong enough. She has resilience woven into her bones.

We talk sometimes, carefully, about the future.

"You must stay as long as you can," she says, "but when you go, we will manage."

Her words are not defiant, but steady, like a rock against the tide. It is both heartbreaking and comforting to know she will endure.

Even at my age, I find myself dreaming of travel again, but differently this time. Not the wild, reckless voyages of my youth, not the nights spent naked on yachts or chasing distractions. Instead, I dream of gentle journeys with Alma and Letecia.

I want to take Letecia to Cornwall, to show her where her grandmother ran the hotel, where I once was a boy filled with longing.

I want to take her to France, to the vineyards near Cahors where her brother Olivier was born.

I want her to see England's countryside, to walk through St Albans where I ran my pub, to understand that her story is tied to many places, many lives.

Perhaps I won't manage it all, but the dream itself fuels me. The thought of holding her hand as she looks out over the cliffs of Cornwall or smells the lavender fields of France keeps my spirit restless in the best of ways.

Another part of looking ahead is the work I do now, these very pages. Writing has become more than a pastime, it is my way of leaving behind a voice, a presence.

I imagine Letecia, older, sitting with these books in her lap, reading not just about her father's mistakes but about his persistence, his longing, his ultimate discovery of love. I imagine her understanding, through these words, that love is not always neat or easy, but it is worth searching for.

If these stories one day reach others, if they resonate, if they bring even a little income for her, then perhaps my words will serve both as testimony and as provision.

One of the unexpected gifts of age is perspective. I no longer rush as I once did. I no longer chase every impulse. Instead, I savour.

Looking ahead does not mean rushing toward some grand finale. It means appreciating each step, each day, each laugh with Letecia, each meal with Alma, each morning under the mango tree.

I used to think life was measured in big events, marriages, businesses, adventures at sea. Now I know life is measured in moments. Looking ahead, I see not just milestones, but thousands of little moments that will, together, make up whatever time I have left.

Of course, part of looking ahead is also acknowledging what cannot be avoided. My body will slow further. My time will one day end. These truths are not easy to face, but neither are they unbearable. Because when I look ahead now, I see Alma and Letecia not left behind in despair, but continuing with strength,

carrying my love with them.

It is not about pretending I will live forever. It is about living fully now, so that when I am gone, my absence is softened by the presence of memories, of love, of words left behind.

Looking ahead, I no longer see the endless searching that defined so much of my past. I see roots, not restlessness. I see hope, not hunger. I see love, not loss.

The boy who once longed for a family, who spent decades chasing it in all the wrong places, now sits beneath a mango tree with a woman who stayed and a daughter who laughs.

And that, I believe, is enough.

Chapter 18 – The Turning Point

There comes a point in life when the future stops presenting itself as an endless road and begins instead to narrow into something more intimate and more exacting. Not smaller, exactly, but more honest. The grand illusions fall away. One stops imagining that time will always be generous, that opportunities will circle back indefinitely, that unfinished business can be left to settle itself.

I had begun to feel that change, not as a single shock, but as a series of quiet recognitions.

For most of my life I had moved forward by instinct, appetite, desire, curiosity, restlessness, fear, and sometimes sheer stubbornness. I had crossed countries and relationships, roles and identities, marriages and mistakes, with the persistent belief

that something further on might explain what had gone before. That if I kept moving, kept reaching, kept wanting, I might eventually come upon the thing itself: the answer, the peace, the love, the understanding, the place where the searching would stop.

But age alters the light by which you see your own life.

By then, I no longer believed in dramatic revelation. What I believed in was accumulation. Small truths, slowly earned. The shape of a life becoming clearer not because all its contradictions had been resolved, but because I had finally stopped expecting them to disappear.

I began to understand that the real turning points are not always the loud ones. Not the weddings or the departures, not even the deaths, though those mark us deeply enough. Sometimes the turning point is quieter than that. It arrives in the middle of an ordinary day, while washing up, or watching someone you love move through a room, or sitting with your own thoughts longer than is comfortable. It comes when you realise that the life in front of you must now be lived with greater care than the life behind you was ever examined.

That was where I found myself.

The energies that had once driven me outward had not vanished, but they had changed character. Desire was no longer only for adventure, conquest, or escape. It had become simpler and harder at once. I wanted steadiness. I wanted to leave something that would outlast confusion. I wanted to understand, if not everything, then enough. Enough to recognise what had mattered. Enough to tell the truth more

plainly. Enough to know what could still be mended, and what could only be carried with dignity.

Part of that shift came through writing.

For years, writing had existed around the edges of my life, something intermittent, hopeful, sometimes practical, sometimes indulgent. Later it became more than that. It became a form of witness. A way of refusing disappearance. A way of telling myself, and perhaps one day others, that these things had happened, that this life had taken the shape it had, that even its mistakes and humiliations were part of the record.

There is a particular loneliness in growing older if you do not attempt to gather your life into some kind of meaning. I do not mean a grand theory, nor a false tidying-up of loose ends. I mean simply the effort to look back without flinching too much, and to look forward without denial.

Writing helped me do that.

It also forced me to see how often I had lived reactively, reaching toward whatever seemed to promise warmth, attention, affirmation, release. I had called some of it love. Some of it had been love. Much of it had also been longing, displacement, fear of emptiness, fear of not mattering. To admit this was not self-condemnation. It was clarity.

The older I became, the less interested I was in flattering versions of my own life.

I wanted the truer one.

And truth, I found, was rarely clean. It did not separate itself neatly into victim and perpetrator, innocence and guilt, strength

and failure. I had been vulnerable, yes. I had also been reckless. I had been harmed, and I had also made poor use of my own freedom. I had sought affection in confused places. I had mistaken intensity for meaning more than once. I had wounded and been wounded. Such recognitions are not comforting, but they are adult.

Perhaps adulthood, properly understood, begins when one stops waiting to be excused by the past and instead begins to account for it.

Yet the turning point in my life was not only inward. It was also bound up with Alma and Letecia, with the daily life we had made, with the strange late grace of finding myself not simply loved, but needed in a quieter, more enduring way.

There is a difference between being desired and being relied upon.

For much of my life I had chased the first without understanding the depth of the second. Desire thrills, flatters, intoxicates. But being relied upon asks something more difficult. It asks steadiness. Presence. Repetition. Care on the days when no romance attaches to it. It asks that you remain.

With Alma, and with Letecia growing into her own life, I came to see that the richest parts of existence are often built from ordinary faithfulness. A meal prepared. A worry shared. A school run. A conversation resumed after silence. A hand on the shoulder. Money put aside. A room repaired. A story told again because it matters to someone else now.

These things do not glitter. But they accumulate into something stronger than glamour ever could.

I had not always understood that. In earlier years, I was too busy reaching past the present to value it. But by then I could see it more clearly: the life before me was asking not for further performance, but for attention. Not for reinvention, but for depth.

That was the turning point.

Not that I ceased to look forward, but that I stopped imagining the future as a place where I might become someone else. It would not redeem me by transformation. It would only deepen whatever honesty I brought into it.

There were still outward matters to consider. France remained in the imagination as both inheritance and unfinished territory. The written word, which had once felt like an uncertain tool, now seemed one of the few things capable of carrying something of me forward. There were practical questions too, money, security, what could be left behind, what might help those I loved when I was no longer there to improvise solutions.

Mortality, when it stops being theoretical, has a way of clarifying administration.

But even these practicalities were part of the deeper shift. I no longer wanted merely to continue. I wanted to prepare. Not in a spirit of surrender, but in one of responsibility. A life does not become meaningful simply because it has been fully felt. It also has to be, in some measure, consciously handed on.

That thought would once have frightened me.

Now it steadied me.

I began to see that letting go is not always loss. Sometimes it is

an act of order. Of love. Of trust. To prepare for what comes next, whether next year, or after one's death, is not morbid. It is a way of respecting the reality that our lives are linked to others and do not end cleanly at the boundary of our own bodies.

So much of my earlier life had been governed by urgency. This later phase required something else: composure.

I cannot pretend I met that requirement perfectly. Fear still came, as did regret, restlessness, unfinished desire, flashes of grief for lives not lived or lives badly handled. The self does not suddenly become serene because it has grown older. But it does, if fortunate, become less willing to lie to itself.

What mattered now was not whether I had solved the mystery of my own life. I had not. What mattered was whether I could inhabit it more truthfully before it was over.

Could I love without fleeing?

Could I remember without dramatising?

Could I write without disguising?

Could I leave something better ordered than I had found it?

Could I become, if not wise, then at least honest?

Those were the questions that replaced the old ones.

In that sense, the turning point was not an ending. It was a revision of purpose.

I no longer wished to outrun the past. Nor did I wish to sink under it. I wanted to place it where it belonged: behind me, within me, but not wholly in command of me. I wanted to let the

future be shaped not by hunger alone, but by discernment.

Perhaps that is the nearest one comes to peace, not certainty, not redemption, not innocence regained, but a willingness to stand inside one's life without constantly trying to escape its outline.

By then, I understood that I had spent many years searching for love when what I had often needed was shelter, recognition, absolution, or simply rest. Love had sometimes been there, but I had rarely known how to receive it without fear.

Now, with time shortening and the false dramas losing their charm, I began at last to recognise the form in which love had truly arrived.

It was there in Alma's steadiness.

In Letecia's presence.

In the ordinary shape of home.

In the work of writing.

In the desire to leave something that would help rather than burden.

That was enough to build upon.

And for the first time in a very long while, I did not feel merely that I was moving through life.

I felt that I had, at last, turned toward it.

Chapter 19 – Facing the Unavoidable

Once you accept that life has entered its later movement, a different kind of attention becomes necessary.

Not panic. Not melodrama. Certainly not the theatrical despair people sometimes mistake for profundity. What is required is something quieter and harder: the willingness to look ahead without pretending that time is limitless, and without surrendering to the illusion that all meaning lies behind you.

That recognition is not always philosophical. Sometimes it arrives physically, without invitation, and forces its lesson upon you.

When the stroke came, I was in the Philippines, far from the country in which I had spent most of my life and far from the illusion that old age can be managed simply by refusing to look at it too closely. It was described as mild, which I suppose was meant to be reassuring. Mild, however, is one of those clinical words that conceals a great deal. It knocked me for six.

I was taken to hospital and discharged myself after only a few hours, with a prescription for more pills than seemed sensible to any reasonable man. Whether from the medication, the shock, or the simple fact that my system has never been the most robust, what followed was a miserable and humbling ordeal, I became incontinent. For weeks I suffered severe runs, weakness, and the kind of exhaustion that strips life down to its barest essentials. There is nothing dignified about such times. One does not feel heroic. One feels diminished, dependent, and abruptly older.

Now, two months later, I am improving, though not unchanged. The body recovers in its own slow and stubborn fashion, but it

leaves its mark. The whole episode has aged me ten years, or so it feels. Not only in strength, but in awareness. One comes to understand, more deeply than before, that the body is not a faithful servant but a temporary ally. It carries us until, one day, it reminds us that it has limits of its own.

Yet even in that unwelcome lesson there was a kind of clarity. Illness strips away what is false. It leaves behind a simpler reckoning. What matters is no longer abstract. Love matters. Family matters. Being of use matters. Being held in the lives of others matters. The old ambitions, the performances, the restless searching, begin to look strangely thin beside the plain fact of being here, still able to love and be loved.

That was the territory I had entered.

The phrase the final act may sound grander than I intend. I do not mean a curtain speech, nor some neatly choreographed conclusion in which every theme resolves itself and every relationship is redeemed. Life does not often grant that kind of symmetry. What I mean is simpler. There comes a stage at which one can no longer live as though postponement were an endless resource. Decisions that once seemed deferrable begin to press. Papers must be put in order. Intentions must be clarified. Words left unsaid must either be spoken or accepted as permanently unsaid.

Mortality alters administration before it alters feeling.

For many years I had lived by improvisation. That had been one of my gifts, and one of my failings. Improvisation can look like courage when it works, and charm when it flatters the ego, but beneath it there is often avoidance. To improvise is sometimes

simply to postpone reckoning under the disguise of flexibility. I had done enough of that in my life to recognise it in myself.

The final act required another temperament.

It required me to ask what would remain if I were no longer present to explain myself, fix things, tell stories, or smooth over confusion with confidence. What would my daughter inherit besides memory? What order had I made from the disorder I had lived through? What obligations did I still owe to the living? What kind of man would my absence reveal me to have been?

These are not comfortable questions. But comfort had ceased to interest me very much, at least where truth was concerned.

I thought often then about legacy, not in the pompous sense of reputation, but in the domestic and moral sense. Legacy is not mainly what people say about you after you die. It is what your choices continue to do to other people when you are no longer there to revise them. It is the emotional climate you leave behind. The practical burdens or freedoms you create. The stories that remain coherent enough to be carried. The kindnesses that prove usable. The damage that has or has not been repaired.

To think this way is humbling. One begins to see how little of life is finally about self-expression and how much is about stewardship.

That word would once have bored me. It sounded dutiful, faintly clerical. Yet it came to feel accurate. By then I was no longer trying to invent myself from scratch. I was trying to steward what remained. time, love, money, documents, memory, unfinished writing, the materials of family, the traces of a life

that had been both larger and messier than I once knew how to admit.

Alma, as always, understood more than she said.

There was a steadiness in her that I had come to trust not as passivity but as strength. She had endured enough in her own life to know that panic rarely improves reality. When I became abstract, she returned things to the ground. When I drifted into plans, she asked who would carry them out. When I grew reflective to the point of indulgence, she brought me back to the actual day in front of us, the shopping, the repairs, the weather, the child, the bills, the meal, the body, the hour.

I had spent much of my life in search of intensity. Alma taught me, repeatedly, the dignity of endurance.

This mattered more as time went on.

There were practical matters to face. Money had to be thought about soberly, not romantically. Property, if any, had to be understood not as proof of achievement but as responsibility. The work I had written needed shape and destination if it were to be anything more than a private habit. I found myself thinking not only about what I wanted to create, but about what could actually be left usefully behind.

There is something bracing about that shift. The imagination becomes less decorative and more accountable.

France returned often to mind in those days, not merely as geography, but as one of the unresolved strands in the larger weave of my life. France had represented many things over the years: possibility, reinvention, appetite, labour, romance, family

extension, alternate belonging. It had not always yielded what it promised, but it had left its mark. To think of France now was to think not in terms of escape, but in terms of continuity. What had begun there? What had endured? What still linked that land to the lives I loved now?

These were no longer youthful questions. They were archival ones, questions of inheritance and sequence.

The written word also changed its place in my mind. I had once treated writing as one pursuit among many, then later as a possible livelihood, then later still as a means of making sense. By this stage it had become something more urgent than ambition and calmer than self-display. Writing was a form of arrangement. An ordering of memory. A refusal to let everything dissolve into anecdote and disappearance.

I think I understood by then that if I did not write things down, others would inherit only fragments. They might inherit love, yes, but not understanding. They might receive my intentions second-hand, without context, without sequence, without the emotional map that made those intentions legible.

Writing, then, was not only for me. It was also for those who would remain.

This did not make the writing easier. If anything, it made it more exacting. To write for posterity in even the smallest domestic sense is to know that one is no longer merely entertaining or confessing. One is preparing a version of truth that others may one day depend on. That is a sobering task. Memory becomes both witness and suspect. One must choose what to include, what to leave out, what to revise, what to soften, what to name

plainly. Sentimentality becomes a kind of dishonesty. So does cruelty masquerading as candour.

I did not always know whether I had found the right balance.

But I knew balance was required.

There were days when all this felt too heavy, when the future seemed less like a horizon and more like an obligation. I would feel the old temptations then: to distract myself, to romanticise the past, to let appetite override proportion, to treat seriousness as something one could outwit with charm. Age does not automatically confer wisdom. It often merely exposes one's habits more clearly.

Still, the general direction had changed. I no longer wanted to be rescued from the consequences of my life. I wanted to meet them.

That included the unavoidable fact of death.

I do not mean that I thought of it incessantly, nor that I became grim. Death, when it enters consciousness properly, does not always darken life. Sometimes it sharpens it. What it removes is the fantasy of endless rehearsal. One begins to understand that this is the performance itself, however imperfectly staged. There is no later draft in which one becomes innocent, only the chance to become truer.

That recognition made me gentler in some ways and less patient in others.

I had less tolerance for vanity, especially my own. Less appetite for old theatricalities. Less interest in conflict for its own sake. But I had more tenderness for weakness, perhaps because I

could see my own more clearly. More gratitude for ordinary continuance. More reverence for small kindnesses. More awareness of how much of a life is carried not in dramatic declarations but in repeated acts of care.

The final act, then, was not about decline so much as concentration.

The circle had narrowed, but what remained within it mattered more intensely. Alma. Letecia. The written record. The practical arrangements that might spare those I loved unnecessary confusion. The emotional truths I still had time to say. The possibility of leaving not perfection, but coherence.

That became enough.

I also found myself thinking about the boy I had once been, not sentimentally, but with a form of recognition that had eluded me for years. He had spent too much of his life searching outward for what had not been securely planted inward. He had mistaken attention for safety, excitement for affirmation, movement for escape, and desire for meaning often enough to make a pattern of it. I did not despise him for that. He had done what he knew. But I could see more clearly now how much of my life had been an attempt to soothe old absences without fully naming them.

Perhaps that is why later peace, if it comes at all, arrives not as triumph but as relief.

To stop demanding that life justify itself in spectacular ways.

To stop expecting love to erase history.

To stop imagining that one more turning, one more journey,

one more passion, one more explanation will finally make the self whole.

Wholeness is not achieved that way.

What one can hope for, I think, is a life sufficiently integrated that its contradictions no longer feel like a private scandal. They become simply part of the record, not to be glorified, not to be hidden, but to be lived with honestly.

That was what I wanted now.

To set things in order where possible.

To say thank you where it mattered.

To face what was coming without embellishment.

To keep making work that might prove useful.

To leave behind more steadiness than confusion.

To love without constant self-interruption.

Not sainthood. Just clarity.

And if there was sadness in this stage, it was not only sadness for what would end. It was also sadness for what had never quite managed to begin, for the selves one might have become under gentler conditions, for the wasted years, the needless wounds, the failures of courage, the care one had not known how to offer when it was required of you. But sadness, too, can become cleaner with age. It no longer needs to accuse. It can simply accompany.

The final act, as I came to understand it, was not the erasure of these things. It was the willingness to carry them without letting

them dictate the whole terms of one's remaining life.

That is not a dramatic revelation. But it is a form of peace.

By then I could feel that something in me had changed from urgency to readiness. Not readiness in the sense of wanting to disappear, nor even in the sense of final completion. I doubt anyone truly feels complete. Rather, readiness as an orientation: the sense that one has turned toward what must be faced and no longer wishes to spend energy pretending otherwise.

There is dignity in that.

And perhaps dignity, more than happiness, becomes the proper ambition of later life.

Not stiffness, not pride, not denial, but the capacity to remain present to one's own existence, even as it narrows, and to those one loves, even as one knows they must outlive you. To continue showing up. To continue ordering what can be ordered. To continue loving where love is still possible. To continue telling the truth as plainly as one can bear.

If I had once spent years searching for love, I now found myself occupied by something quieter but no less profound: the wish to leave love in a form that would remain useful after me.

That, in the end, may be the truest measure of what a life has learned.

I could not yet know how the story would close. But I knew this much: I had stopped running ahead of my own ending, and I had stopped pretending it was elsewhere.

I was in it now.

And strangely enough, that made me feel more alive, not less.

Chapter 20 – The Circle Widens

It may seem strange to speak of looking forward in the later years of a life. People assume that the older one becomes, the more one turns exclusively toward the past, as though memory were the only country still open for travel. There is some truth in that. The past does grow louder with age. It gathers detail, acquires weight, insists on being reckoned with. But that is not the whole story.

Even late in life, one continues to look ahead.

Not in the old way, perhaps. Not with the extravagant confidence of youth, nor with the appetite for reinvention that once made every horizon seem like a promise. Looking forward becomes less theatrical than that. It is no longer about becoming someone entirely new. It is about attending more faithfully to what remains possible, what remains necessary, and what remains worth giving.

That was what I had begun to understand.

The future had narrowed, yes, but it had also deepened. I no longer needed it to be dramatic in order for it to matter. I did not need one final great adventure to justify the story. What mattered more was whether I could inhabit the life in front of me with greater honesty, greater tenderness, and greater usefulness than I had managed in some earlier phases of living.

Looking forward, then, meant asking different questions.

Not: What else can I conquer?

Not: What new self might I still invent?

But: What can still be made true?

What can still be given?

What can still be protected?

What kind of presence can I be while I am still here?

Those questions felt more adult to me than many I had asked before.

By this stage, the future had a face. More than one face, in fact. It had Alma's face, with all the patience, intelligence, and quiet endurance she had brought into my life. It had Letecia's face, carrying forward not only youth but continuity, possibility, and that strange miracle by which one generation both repeats and revises the last. It had the faces of others too, some near, some far, Rachel across the sea, Olivier in France, the scattered branches of a family that had grown in different soils and yet remained, however imperfectly, connected.

It is one thing to think abstractly about legacy. It is another to see the people in whom it will actually continue.

That made the future feel less impersonal. Less like a diminishing stretch of time, and more like a field of responsibilities and affections that would outlast me. A man may not control what follows him, but he can influence its shape. He can decide whether to leave behind confusion or clarity, coldness or kindness, evasiveness or witness.

I found I cared much more about that than I once might have

done.

There had been a time in my life when “looking forward” meant escape. A new place, a new relationship, a new intensity, a new scheme, a new chapter in which old complications would somehow lose their grip. But age teaches you, if you are at all teachable, that unresolved things travel with you. The future is not a border crossing out of the self. It is simply the next room in the same house.

That might sound disappointing, but I no longer experienced it that way. There was freedom in abandoning the fantasy of magical transformation. It left room for more realistic hopes.

I hoped, for instance, to leave my affairs better ordered than many people do. That is not a romantic ambition, but it is a loving one. There is mercy in administration. In not leaving those who remain to sort through unnecessary confusion. In making documents legible, intentions clear, resources accessible, work preserved, wishes understood. These things may seem prosaic compared with the passions by which people often narrate their lives, but they are among the truest expressions of care.

I also hoped to keep writing.

Not because I imagined writing would save me in any grand sense, but because it had become one of the few ways I knew to remain present to my own life without disguising it. Writing gave form to memory, yes, but it also gave dignity to experience that might otherwise dissolve into private incoherence. It allowed me to say: this happened; I felt this; I failed here; I loved here; I misunderstood this; I learned that; this is the shape things

took.

There is a kind of gratitude in that.

And perhaps gratitude was one of the truest forward-facing emotions left to me. Not gratitude as performance or piety, but as recognition. The recognition that despite everything, the confusions, the longings, the embarrassments, the mistakes, the hurts received and given, life had still afforded me extraordinary things. Not perfection, certainly. But presence. Affection. Beauty. Meaning enough to keep working with. The chance to love and be loved in forms I had not always deserved and did not always know how to receive.

When I thought of the future then, I thought less in terms of achievements than in terms of atmosphere. What kind of atmosphere would I contribute to the lives around me? Anxiety or steadiness? Drama or proportion? Bitterness or generosity? It is humbling to realise how much of what one leaves behind is not argument or theory, but tone. The tone in which one lived. The emotional weather one generated in a household. The habits of mind and heart one made normal for others.

That thought stayed with me.

I wanted, if possible, to become easier to live with. Not duller, not diminished, but less governed by appetite, less captive to restless dissatisfaction, less likely to burden love with demands it could never meet. This too was part of looking forward: not expecting the future to rescue me from my nature, but trying consciously to refine that nature while time remained.

That task is never glamorous. It happens in repetition. In pauses. In choosing not to sharpen an irritation. In listening a moment

longer. In not making one's own mood the centre of the room. In returning, again and again, to the practical forms of affection that hold a life together.

Alma understood this instinctively. I learned it more slowly.

And then there was Letecia.

There is something profoundly corrective about seeing the future embodied in one's child. Not merely because it stirs protectiveness, though it does, but because it reveals the smallness of one's own melodramas. One becomes aware that the future is not a stage on which one must continue performing oneself. It is a reality into which others must live. That changes your relationship to your own time. It makes you want to leave more than impressions. It makes you want to leave foundations.

This did not mean I became solemn all the time. There was still room for laughter, absurdity, appetite, and pleasure. In fact, part of looking forward properly was learning that joy need not be frantic in order to be real. It could live in meals, in weather, in family talk, in work completed, in small plans, in the ordinary peace of a day not wasted in self-division.

I no longer needed joy to arrive disguised as excitement.

That was a relief.

Of course, looking forward also meant accepting uncertainty. There were still things unresolved. There always would be. Health remains uncertain until it is not. Money feels secure until it is tested. Families carry tensions no matter how lovingly arranged. Death itself never arrives by appointment. To look

forward honestly is not to assume control over these things, but to proceed without making uncertainty an excuse for paralysis.

That, too, I was learning.

I thought often then of roads I would not travel and versions of myself that would never now be realised. There was sadness in that, naturally. But there was also release. A life becomes lighter when it stops trying to contain all possible selves. One cannot be everyone. One cannot live every road. One can only inhabit the road one is on with as much courage and coherence as one can manage.

Perhaps that is why the title looking forward mattered to me. It does not promise arrival. It promises orientation.

I was oriented now toward what still mattered.

Toward Alma's steadiness.

Toward Letecia's future.

Toward the work still to be written.

Toward the family, however scattered, that remained mine.

Toward the practical acts of care that outlast performance.

Toward gratitude.

Toward truth.

Toward some final measure of peace, if peace could be had.

That peace, I suspected, would not come as stillness so much as alignment. The feeling that one's life, while never pure, had at least ceased pulling itself apart in opposite directions. The

feeling that one no longer needed to flee one's own history in order to continue living. The feeling that love, at last, had become less a hunger than a responsibility freely embraced.

That was the future I could still see.

Not infinite, but sufficient.

Not spectacular, but real.

Not innocent, but usable.

And usable is no small thing. A life that becomes usable to others, that can comfort, clarify, provide, steady, witness, and bless, has achieved more than many glamorous ones ever do.

So I looked forward.

Not blindly.

Not sentimentally.

Not without fear.

But with a clearer sense than I had ever had before of what I wanted the remaining years to contain.

I wanted less noise and more truth.

Less performance and more presence.

Less grasping and more giving.

Less illusion and more tenderness.

Less flight and more home.

If those sound like simple wishes, it is only because age strips complexity down to its moral core. What looked complicated in

youth often proves simple later, though never easy.

And perhaps that was the gift of these later years: not that they made life easier, but that they made its essentials harder to ignore.

So I turned toward them.

Toward the future not as an escape from myself, but as the last honest place in which to become more fully the man I had spent a lifetime trying, in so many confused ways, to find.

EPILOGUE

Looking back, I can see that I spent much of my life searching for something I could not properly name.

I called it love, and sometimes it was. But often it was longing, or the wish to be seen, or the hope that somewhere, in someone, I might finally feel at rest. That search took me through places, relationships, mistakes, awakenings, and losses that I did not always understand at the time.

What I understand now is simpler.

The road did not lead me away from myself. It led me back, slowly, imperfectly, and often against my will, toward the life I had actually lived and the people who had truly mattered.

I do not look back on that life as a clean story. It was untidy, restless, sometimes foolish, sometimes painful. I hurt others and was hurt in turn. I searched in the wrong places more than once. But I also loved, learned, endured, and, in time, began to see more clearly.

If age has given me anything, it is not certainty, but perspective.

I know now that belonging cannot be forced. That love is more often steadiness than drama. That truth matters, even when it arrives late. And that peace, when it comes at all, comes not from escaping the past, but from learning to carry it more honestly.

Alma gave me steadiness.

Letecia gave me a future worth caring about.

And the boy I once was, longing, reckless, half-lost, still deserves kindness.

The road to myself was longer than I expected.

But I think, at last, I have reached a place where I can stop running and simply be.



For Alma, who steadied me.

For Letecia, who completed me.

And for the boy I once was, may he finally rest